BID HER AWAKE

MARY GRIGS

How Susan walks in the shadow of her beautiful older sister until love bids her awake.

$2.00

BID HER AWAKE

By Mary Grigs

'Bid Her Awake' is the beautifully written story of two daughters who were born to an artist and his wife. The one, Alix, is lovely, attractive, and successful; the other, Susan, walks in her sister's shadow. The two girls grow up in Sussex, until, through the restlessness of the elder, they break up their home and come, as a fine, bold venture, to London, where the younger girl falls in love. The subtle conflict between the two sisters, which has never before been made plain, is now startled into activity, and Susan is awakened from her dream world to sharp reality and a knowledge of her power.

This is a first novel of exceptional promise. The author seizes the beauty and drama inherent in the commonest occurrences and with intense and subtle observation endows characters and scenes with life.

BID HER AWAKE

◆

MARY GRIGS

O. P.

9/16/41

REFERENCE LIBRARY OF
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
2 PARK STREET, BOSTON

Tout bien ou rien

NOT TO BE TAKEN FROM THE SHELVES
EXCEPT BY PERMISSION OF
THE LIBRARIAN

REFERENCE LIBRARY * HOUGHTON MIFFLIN CO. * BOSTON, MASS.
Archive Collection
* *
This book may not leave the Offices
and if borrowed must be returned within 7 days

BID HER AWAKE

BID HER AWAKE

BY

MARY GRIGS

BOSTON AND NEW YORK
HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY
The Riverside Press Cambridge
1930

COPYRIGHT, 1930, BY MARY GRIGS

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED INCLUDING THE RIGHT TO REPRODUCE
THIS BOOK OR PARTS THEREOF IN ANY FORM

The Riverside Press
CAMBRIDGE · MASSACHUSETTS
PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

TO

MY FATHER

BID HER AWAKE

∴

PART ONE

BID HER AWAKE

⁂

PART ONE

CHAPTER ONE

THE house that Alix and her sister Susan had decided to buy showed eight windows looking over the river, and two more which, half-buried beneath a grassy bank, and obscured by a confusion of greyish shrubs, relieved as well as they could the gloom of a basement kitchen.

Over the first-floor windows were fine-moulded pediments; in front of them, iron balconies.

'I wonder,' said Alix, standing with one hand on the folded shutters, 'if it is going to be very noisy.' She looked down into the street, where a baby in a perambulator, pushed up against the area railings of a neighbouring house, was loosing his complicated miseries in an errant, penetrating cry.

'Oh, no, madam. As a matter of fact this is the quietest part of the Embankment.' The agent, who had found the property difficult to dispose of, was in no mind to let his client be discouraged from her first mood of enthusiasm. 'You will hear, of course, the morning traffic. But you see you are just off the highway. You have the advantages of a side-turning without losing your wonderful view.'

'It is a wonderful view. What do you think about it, Susan?'

Susan had immediately liked the house, but now she was teased by doubts and depressions. Since, therefore, she could not answer, she smiled — quickly, without any real reason for doing so, except a wish to fall in with her sister's mood and so be saved from questioning. But Alix took her by the hand, and in the face of that deliberate charm, that gentle consideration, Susan's uneasiness, shamefaced, slipped out of mind.

'I love it already. It's an adorable house.' They turned and looked again at the gracious lines of fireplace and wall and folding door. The sun lay warm on bare boards and faded paper. 'It seems a pity that we must put furniture in it. It would be nice to camp here, Alix. We'd be quite happy.'

'Goose. Can't you see how lovely the furniture is going to look? We must have the painted bureau in here, and mother's writing-desk. And Susie, what a perfect corner for the Yellow Dragon ——'

'Don't forget the lodgers. They'll want a little furniture, too.' Susan broke away, and walked to the folding doors to look through a smaller room to the garden beyond. Trees were blown with budding green; feathery, unsubstantial trees, they seemed to have no root in earth, but to be as irresponsible as the winds that played about them.

'Would you like to see any of the rooms again, Miss Pellerin?' The agent shifted the papers under his arm. His watch had stopped, but he knew it was getting late. He saw in his mind's eye the pile of correspondence still to be attended to in the office before he could switch off the light and lock the door, and buy a box of peppermint creams to take home to his wife.

But Alix, who was counting on her fingers, made a gesture to silence him.

'Eight rooms,' she was saying, 'and all of them can be let. Eight rooms...'

'There's ourselves,' said Susan, 'and Penny.'

'Penny can have the attic; and we — I'd forgotten ourselves. Six rooms, then, to be let.' She frowned. 'Two and a half guineas for the front rooms, and thirty shillings for the back...' The agent, anxious to hurry her, made a calculation. But Alix was no longer listening. 'It's settled, then,' she said, 'and you'll send the agreement to me at Hissop's?'

'To-night, Miss Pellerin.' This had been worth waiting about for, after all. 'I'm so glad you're going to take it. I'm sure you'll find it satisfactory. And what will you do about the fixtures?'

'Oh, we'd better have them. What are they? Lights and so on? Yes, we'll have the fixtures. Come on, Susan.'

The agent ushered them out of the room, and so down the stairs. The house seemed tired after the ordeal of putting its best side forward. Susan, slipping a hand across the blurred patterning on the walls of the hall, thought how weary it must be of people's joys and enterprise, their loves and hates and enthusiasms. 'I wonder if it will find us happy dwellers?' she thought, lingering. 'We must be a change, I should think, if the last people were like their wallpaper.' She followed Alix out into the sunshine.

In the street the agent looked sharply up at the church clock, and settled his bowler hat at an angle on his head. Then: 'You'll let me have the agreement back by return, Miss Pellerin? The quicker we can put it through now, the better, of course, for us all. I think I told you that decorations will be done to suit the purchaser. *Good-evening* ——' And he took his hat off again, though he had adjusted it so carefully the moment before, and was away up a side-turning before the sisters had realized what part of the Embankment they were in, and which way they must turn for Victoria.

They took the road to the left. The sun was low, and a haze over the river removed from it all evidence of reality. Little ripples of golden light played a game of their own in the misty stream. Gulls caught the gleam again on their silent wings, and people idling, leaning against the parapet, were gilded by it too. The cries of children, playing about the trees and iron seats, made a merry music; like a thread through it all ran the tune of a distant flute-player, beguiling pennies out of the men and women who were silhouetted against the yellow interior of a barroom.

The church clock struck six. Alix looked at her watch, as if Father Time himself could not be right unless she should give him confirmation.

'Let's buy a knocker for our house before we go home.'

They took a side-turning; haphazardly branched off again. A few minutes' walk brought them to a second-hand shop. A thin-haired man in a baize apron showed them a medley of knockers: dolphins and ships, and heads of Dickens, and Anne Hathaway's cottages, in brass. But Alix, with fastidious fingers, was turning over the oddments in a cracked blue bowl. She stirred in their silted dust a trivet, a horse-headed dagger, a battered and mouldy book. Then she held up a worn little figure.

'I've found him, Susie. Isn't this the right thing?'

It was a winged figure — a cupid or cherub: the passing of years had given a mischievous turn to his features, and his almost shapeless hands grasped a harp as if it were a bow. Susan laughed, delighted with him; and Alix paid for him with a ten-shilling note.

In the street she hailed a taxi.

'We'll be extravagant for the last time,' she said. And they were conveyed in a comfortable darkness, hung about with a scent of chypre from the last passenger, to Victoria.

The sisters were silent all the way down in the train. Alix's dark head rested against the back of the carriage, her eyes bright and tired. Susan, exhausted with imagining, let her mind rest upon the moving landscape, and found it quickened with a fresh beauty through her own excitement. This seemed an augury for the house, an omen for its prosperity: her mind grew clear, and important discoveries seemed to shape there, as so often happens when the body is tired. The certainty that their plan was right filled her with content.

The clouds had closed completely over, and rain was falling when they got out at the little

Sussex station. They took the village cab. The regular sound of the horse's hoofs and the irregular swaying and jolting of the cab, the flicker of the lamps and the monotonous succession of illumined hedge to illumined hedge, subdued Susan, and almost hypnotized her into a state of depression. Rain streaked down the windows. She was as weary and silent as Alix when they turned in at the gate and the wheels grated on cobblestones. 'I thought you was never coming, Miss,' said the voice of Penny from the darkness behind the shaded lamp she carried. Alix brushed past her and the draught of her movement made the round blob of light advance and recede.

'Well, here we are, so for God's sake hurry with dinner,' she said, and was already halfway up the stairs. The bathroom door banged behind her. And Susan, too tired to move, waited while the soup grew cold, and Alix, recovering her spirits, sang a tune in her bath with the night for audience, and played her childhood's game of blowing bubbles through her fingers.

CHAPTER TWO

WHEN a house, undisturbed for years, except in those temporary ways which leave it settled again more immovably in a comfortable routine, is raked from cellar to roof in the impersonal process of packing and transplanting, familiar rooms become impregnated with shifting shades and memories of the past. Laughter and tears seem in the air, forgotten unhappiness and joy tread again upon one another's heels, and the living beings who move among these shades seem robbed of a little of their substance, themselves made more shadowy by this intangible invasion.

Susan found herself continually hampered by this tugging and pulling from the past in her wish to attend to the needs of the present. She would go into one room after another with Penny, a pad of paper, a couple of pencils, and a growing list of things to be sold and things to be taken with them. Penny's face lengthened and her eyes grew rounder and rounder with sorrow as the days went by. Susan would hear a sniff, and the rustling of a handkerchief. Then:

'I'm sorry, Miss, but I can't help seeing Miss Marguerite — begging your pardon, your mother

— bring this picture into the drawing-room, and not able to make up her mind where she should put it.'

Or, with less restraint:

'Oh, Miss Susan, I can't abear to see the mistress's things being took down after all these years.'

Susan tried to comfort the old woman, leading her thoughts from the past to the future; but her own mind was distracted with shadows. She could see her mother in the shot-green frock in which their father had painted her; she could hear the rustling of long full skirts, her eyes were deluded with a vision of the laughing face: the room seemed to give forth the scent that still, though it was faded and changed, hung about the small intimate possessions that had been stored since Mrs. Pellerin's death. The father's personality was less insistent; perhaps because there had been no one to catch such quick living sketches of him as those he had made of his wife. But it was more in their life than her own that Susan lived during these days of sorting and packing; and it was not surprising that, under these conditions, the progress was slow.

Her memory could not go back far enough to arrange its tumbling impressions in proportion and coherence. It did not occur to her that her parents had lived much of their lives before she was born, or that marriage had changed them. She could not see Penny's Miss Marguerite even as clearly as Penny saw her; though the old woman so loved her mistress, with the kind of affection that denies any fault, that her vision could not have been clear at any time.

For Susan's mother had arrived to enliven the formal garden and severe immaculate country house of her parents rather late in their lives. Mrs. Summers was a woman who had never been as popular as it seemed that she should be, for, though her manner was delightful, and she never made about any one unkind or scornful remarks, people talking to her were always aware of her thoughts like so many sharp little needles pricking uncomfortably into their characters and lives. Her husband was less shrewd than she, but more scornful; so that he was actively disliked, while she was always spoken of with admiration — for there was nothing unadmirable, except this incommunicable attitude experienced by others, to say about her.

Marguerite was a joy to the whole countryside, as well as to her parents; for here was a delightful child, a sunny and attractive personality, friendly and lovable, demure and reserved. Only her mother saw in her daughter her own hard will; but it was so tempered with pleasant characteristics that it was scarcely comparable. Nobody guessed that she had also inherited her father's narrowness of outlook; for, again, other qualities redeemed it. She had a very generous heart. She found herself liking a number of things which neither she nor her mother — and even more definitely her father — could approve of; beginning, when she was nine months old, with a dishevelled golliwog that had belonged to their coachman's son, and finishing — as far as her parents were concerned — with her husband. Her method was simple. Where her adventuring heart tempted her to overstep the secluded pathway of her life, she found instead a way of bringing what it was that attracted her out of its native surroundings to be transplanted in her own. So the golliwog was taught to forget its lowly origin, and became the most respected toy in the nursery; and so, later, the coachman's son himself became her own personal and faithful bodyguard. And in such a manner she took to her Joseph Pellerin.

'The most promising artist of the day,' said her host, exaggerating nervously as he found himself obliged, by her gentle inflexible will, to present his Bohemian guest to Miss Summers.

'Miss Summers needs no explanation,' Joseph had countered, bowing over her hand, 'for she is obviously the most beautiful woman in Europe.'

Marguerite was not impressed by the too-obvious compliment; but she felt her interest and her heart leap towards the man. Joseph saw in her no less than he had said; and it may have been true, for she was beautiful and good. He was accustomed to gaining what he wanted, and he did not realize until afterwards that Marguerite's will had, from the beginning, worked with his, and not against it.

He was a painter of promise; a man whose genius was debated in art schools, and his greater renown already predicted. His progress was hindered by the easy circumstances into which he had been born, and by his own tendency to become a dilettante. He wooed Marguerite with the care and skill he might have expended on a painting; with genuine appreciation, and a humble acknowledgment that he could not do justice to her flower-like perfection. He saw her fairly clearly, for he was critical; but he did not rebel against her limitations, or try to change them. He recognized her mother in her: knowing that Mrs. Summers disliked him — though he underestimated that dislike; she hated everything about him, from his virtues to his vices — he saw very plainly the path that he must take.

Marguerite did not want to be married to a genius; she wanted a talented husband. She did not understand, nor would she care for, the stormy process of creation; but she appreciated his finished work with a mingling of affection and unprejudiced good taste. And Joseph, since he loved her, and since he had a theory that the production and skilful rearing of children is, in its own way, as valuable an artistic effort as any other, put his ambition behind him, and gave her what she wanted. So he proved to the doubters that his pleasant bearded face, his satirical eye, and clever spatulate hands, his well-proportioned body in its habitual suit of brown tweeds, had never harboured the uneasy flame of genius, however promising had been his talent. He had made up his mind to suffer the transplanting creditably.

Hissop's was a farmhouse, thirty comfortable miles from Marguerite's people. Joseph had an architect friend who, over many dinner and luncheon-table consultations, converted it for them. When he had finished with it, he had made a cool, brown-and-yellow house of surprising spaciousness, sheltered from the changing weather by hills which seemed to be another evidence of the pleasure taken by Providence in furthering Marguerite's plans. The house took on her character as soon as she stepped into it; once she had walked through the rooms they seemed to exist for no other purpose than to hold her; lacking her, they stood on tiptoe for her return.

She was like a flower in delicacy, in beauty, in simplicity of outlook, and in happy enjoyment of the sun, the earth beneath her feet, and the changing seasons. The rain was a brother to her; only storms frightened her, driving her under the shelter of Hissop's mellowed roof. Having her husband in contentment with her, she was perfectly happy. With the delight of a child, and the subtlety of a woman, she showed her mother how circumspect and creditable Joseph had become. But when she knew that she herself was to have a child she turned back to the strong, powerful guardian of her own babyhood, and Joseph found himself a stranger in the house, a leaf continually tormented by the steady breeze of his mother-in-law's determination. He was told that Marguerite liked this, and that, and was not accustomed to the other thing. He transferred his studio from the house to an empty stable. He discovered in his wife almost a dislike of him, as if she were seeing him through the eyes of Mrs. Summers. He realized that he had slipped backwards. He tried to renew their happiness by conversation with her; but when she would have turned, like a plant, to the sun of loving comprehension, he offered her instead the dusty refreshment of arguments and theories. She found his scientific outlook upon sex and birth too strange a thistle to grow in her pretty garden, and turned her back on him, relying on her mother for spiritual as well as physical guidance.

Whether she had actually grown a little in the Sussex house, so that she could not quite return to the expected comfort of her childhood, or whether unselfishly she sensed Joseph's loss of her, during the two weeks before Alix was born, she turned again to him with a renewal of all her affection. Joseph, with upspringing joy, showed that he, too, had learned his lesson. There was no more talk of science or of schools of physiology. Mrs. Summers found herself with half the power that she had held during these latter months. But she stayed with them, and drew to herself as much of Marguerite's dependence as she could. Joseph was driven to a frenzy of irritation on the night the baby was born; a hot night in July, with a threat of thunder in the air, and a curious pink light that made the sky look unfamiliar and malicious, reversing the tone-values of heaven and earth. Mrs. Summers sat quietly sewing baby-clothes in the warm drawing-room, the French windows wide open to entice whatever air might possibly be stirring. Joseph grew conscious of his ruffled beard, his paint-stained nails, his crumpled suit, and of his own unsatisfactory character; though Mrs. Summers was making infrequent but pleasant conversation, and did not once look up at him. Self-consciousness drove him into the garden. And, as night and the storm drew on together, so did Marguerite's travail gather in intensity. Alix was born soon after midnight.

CHAPTER THREE

ALIX was a lovely baby, perfectly proportioned, black-eyed, a delightful egoist, a coquette from the cradle. Marguerite enfolded her in fragrance, delicate lace, and fine, spotted muslin; adoring her, encouraging each small sign of individuality, rewarding each tiny exhibition of intelligence with a showering of love and delight. Joseph had no greater joy than to indulge them both; loving the mother in the child, and the child in its mother. Even his mother-in-law became more gracious. He had contrived the production of a perfect granddaughter. And, though his appearance and manners deteriorated as he sloughed off parenthood and became again a workman, his quick brush scattered about the house innumerable studies in water-colour of this newest incarnation of the Madonna. These Mrs. Summers depreciated as they lay — so many pieces of brightly splotched paper — untidily on his desk, or the drawing-room table. But when, later, Marguerite showed them to her nicely mounted and framed, she changed her opinion, graciously accepted a trio for the adornment of her own boudoir, and even introduced her son-in-law into casual conversation with her acquaintances. So Alix grew up in the happiest of atmospheres.

The first clear showing of her quick wits was on an evening in September, when Joseph had been up to London on business connected with his work, for which there was always a certain steady sale. While he was away the calm of the weather was broken by rain. When Marguerite, expecting him, walked out on to the cobblestones of the courtyard and down towards the gate, the fresh wet smell of soaked leaves, gently steaming earth, yellow thatch giving moisture back to the sky, and a thousand mingled and hidden flowers filled her nostrils and awoke a like grateful radiance in herself. Rain, collected on the leafy trees above her head, and left behind when the clouds had long passed over, was spilled with a tiny sound on the path, on her hair, on her outstretched hand, on the tip of her nose. To Joseph, as he walked confidently towards her, she looked like the fragile incarnation of Nature herself. He put an arm around her waist and kissed her bare shoulder.

'I've got a thing, a very pretty thing, and who is it wants' — he teased her, producing a small packet, and holding it out of her reach — 'who is it wants this very pretty thing?'

'Oh, Joseph, darling, let me see! Give it me now!'

'You shall have it in the nursery. We'll show the infant how nice her mother could look, if she weren't such a dowdy, and took a little trouble ——'

For that she ran away from him, as he had expected her to do, and he found her, flushed and laughing, stooping over the cradle, pretending to be absorbed in motherly affection. But the spreading pink that tipped her ears told him she was waiting; and he strode up behind her, and clasped a chain around her neck. Quickly she caught the rare jade flower, carved Chinese fashion, like a floating lotus, that dangled under her chin. As she turned to kiss and thank him, the baby watched her with round bright eyes, watched the translucent toy swung out of her reach. In a second the peace of the nursery was broken. The cradle was tossed and tumbled this way and that. Marguerite, in alarm, stooped over the crying infant, trying to soothe its stormy wail with a pretence of stern words. Instantly the jade was caught in strong, possessive baby fingers, and Alix, with a tear on her chin, crowned her triumph with a cheerful crow and a smile so delightful that her parents looked at one another in pride, that this miraculous child should be their doing. So Alix cut her first teeth on a piece of Chinese jade so precious that the man from whom Joseph had bought it never again saw its like. And if Joseph was distressed to see the fine lines of the ancient workmanship blunted by years of careless infantile possession, he threw this regret into the secret place where he kept his lost ambition, and pride, and youthful zeal, and turned the key on them all.

Alix as she grew loved both her mother and father, making first the one jealous with her flattering attentions, then the other. She tried to acquire the capabilities of each of them; frowning one minute over a needle and a piece of embroidery stolen from a work-basket; covering sheets of paper an hour after with bold, bright splashes of colour that she proudly demanded to have recognized as Crackle, her spaniel puppy, or a flower, or the house, or her mother. At three she was an imperious successful little person, capable of managing both her parents with a firmness that would have delighted her grandmother, if Mrs. Summers had visited them more frequently than she did now. And now — it was December, and their lives were wrapped in the security of lamplight and firelight, while mists and encroaching fogs from the distant sea shortened the already brief hours of daylight — Joseph prepared his daughter for the coming of another baby. After a doubtful silence, when discretion warred with the fears in her mind, Joseph went on talking, picturing for her the delights and responsibilities a small brother or sister would bring. He showed her herself as a proud guide for unsteadier feet, a wise instructor for younger ignorance. The notion captivated her, and her complaisance endeared her to her parents the more. As Marguerite prepared for the arrival of Susan, her thoughts were far more with Alix; she hoped that her second baby would be a boy, but without any great urgency in the wish.

Susan was born in April, nearly a month before she was expected — a sadly forlorn-looking baby, with a head too big for its body. Marguerite was very ill, indeed, and the child was immediately taken from her, to be crooned over and looked after by Penny, a capable and devoted woman of forty-two, who was still as diffident and humble towards life now as she had been when she was promoted from the kitchen to attend upon the nursery in Marguerite's mother's house.

CHAPTER FOUR

SUSAN, sitting now on the carpetless drawing-room floor, lost in dreamy reconstructions of the past, in each hand one of her father's water-colour portraits, made no attempt to order her reminiscences, or marshal them in coherent sequence. One minute she was remembering the first departure of Alix for school, the next she was herself a small baby, struggling with terror in a stilt-legged chair while two loved dogs fought with snarling treachery below her, and Alix, perversely delighted, clapped her hands — unconscious of danger — and danced round them, urging them on.

All Susan's memories were dependent upon Alix; if not because of her presence, then, importantly, because of her absence. Alix holding her hand, pulling her towards a group of people in the drawing-room, lit, as now, with delicate spring sunshine.

'Here is my baby sister. She's too small to say "How do you do?" but she will shake hands if you don't frighten her.' A maturer imagination pieced together the shadowy fragments; but Susan was again vividly in a world in which skirts, trousers, and the arms of chairs, door-handles, and the under-sides of tables, and more particularly the patterning of rugs and carpets, were the immediate objects of vision. She let herself slip back into the moment in which the terrific clatter of fire-irons, tumbled by an unsteady childish hand off the great brass dogs, had seemed — in her consciousness of clumsiness and guilt — to bring the heavens down in wrath upon her head, though no one had punished or scolded. Only a few punishments came to her mind, but she could not remember the occasion of them, only the dark overhanging misery of isolation. Alix had stood so often between her and misunderstandings; chivalry was a fine cloak to wear, and it suited the beautiful child well. Susan was accustomed to knowing herself odd, awkward, ugly, and, in some agonizing way, amusing; and she knew continual gratitude to her lovely sure-footed sister for explaining her, protecting her, losing her, or pushing her forward at appropriate moments.

Another quick memory pushed its way upwards: small, bright, and no more than a second's reflection of a whole aspect of childhood. Susan was sitting, as usual, on the floor; the safest place for a child who was continually tumbling over her own feet. The tears were rolling down her cheeks — not because she was unhappy, but because she was in pain; for Alix was burning the hair off her head with curling-irons borrowed from her mother's dressing-table. Sharply the smell of smoking hair, the agony of strained and scorching scalp, revived the picture. Joseph had gone singing past the door, smelled disaster, entered the nursery. The whistle died on his pursed lips. Alix had suffered the humiliation of punishment like a martyr, sitting proudly on the extreme edge of the bed — she had a room of her own now, next to the nursery, a room papered with a Morris pattern, and hung with rosebud-embroidered curtains, after the fashion of the time — refusing to give any explanation of her conduct. Her restoration to favour came when Marguerite, unhappy at her darling's misbehaviour, listened at the door, as dark overtook the unrepentant sinner justifying herself to the Lord.

'O God, make Mummy sorry she was so cruel to me, and make Daddy wish he hadn't never punished me. O God, tell Mummy I was only trying to make Susie beautiful like me, so people shouldn't laugh at her. Please, God, won't you make her just a little bit more ornerary, so she doesn't fall down so often? And now if you don't mind I'll go to sleep 'cause it's getting dark, and you know I really didn't ought to have been punished....'

As Susan followed the bright pictures across the sensitive film of her memory, one emotion above others struggled to take possession of her again, and to drag her back even more intimately to those escaped days. A deep love for her mother, a love which had never found expression, and existed only as a mask through which she had looked out on the whole world, made her heart beat faster now, and brought childhood a great stride nearer. Marguerite had loved her comical second-born almost in spite of herself, feeling her to be half a changeling. She longed sometimes, with a passionate impatience, to be able to make her all her own, to remove the sadness from the big melancholy eyes, and infuse the slow eager limbs with her own grace. But Susan was so conscious of her difference that Marguerite could not approach her. Instead she would appeal to Alix, who was so ready a go-between; and Alix, proud of the confidence, tried to teach Susan the subtleties of easy behaviour, so that the younger child, filled with admiration for her sister's loveliness, would be more aware than ever of the difference between them.

It was only with her father that Susan's legs carried her securely, that her tongue was uneasily loosened, and her spirit moved to laughter. Taking her for walks with him about the countryside, he grew absorbed in its interests, pointing them out to her with an impersonal enthusiasm that struck in her a deep note of response. With him, or by herself, she spanned wide ditches with her thin brown legs, and peered into hidden robins' nests without alarming the watchful inhabitants. She trod rutty lanes with ease, and looked for plovers' eggs in ploughed fields without once stumbling into the treacherous furrows. Joseph enjoyed her companionship, and, though when back again at Hissop's Alix was once more the charming focus for all their attention, he often found himself appealing to Susan for understanding in some matter that bored his elder daughter and Marguerite. But in front of them she was tongue-tied and incomprehensible; and he grew accustomed to substituting a kind of gruff heartiness for any more satisfactory indoor relationship.

Long after Susan had grown out of her clumsiness, it was still expected of her.

'Can I trust you to fetch me my sewing, darling, or will you tumble with it all over the floor?' Marguerite would say, with a kindly teasing, wondering if there were no power on earth by which she might improve Susan's social graces. She never guessed how, in Alix's first term at school, when the house was emptied for the first time in ten years — except for brief visits to her grandmother — of the bright presence about which everything else revolved, Susan lay awake at night, picturing in her imagination a new companionship between herself and her mother, in which she became as charming as Alix, and Marguerite surrounded her with the aura of pride and demonstrativeness that gave Alix such confidence and security.

Susan was often ill, with small complaints that were more irritating than dangerous — constant sore throats, bronchitis, inflamed glands, feverish chills. Alix had two serious attacks, one of diphtheria and one of scarlet fever, which kept the house in stillness and an awful quietude while they lasted, and plunged it into exuberant joy on her recovery. When Susan was nine, she followed Alix to school, a year younger than her sister had been, but far more learned, since Joseph had found that instructing her was a form of keeping his own wits sharp, and he had, with a detached amusement, opened to her the door of his library.

Frome Court had been prepared for Alix's sister. Alix, who was never awkward and coltish, as most girls are at twelve years old, had won for herself considerable honour by describing her sister's disabilities, and loyally anticipating any attacks upon her.

'You're not to tease her, any of you. And you're not to laugh at her if she tumbles on her nose at hockey.'

'All right, Sir Roland. We won't hurt your Oliver.'

Alix had forgotten — or had never noticed — that Susan was growing out of her *gaucherie*, and that in her own unobtrusive way, like a windflower in a wood, she was charming. If the younger girl had made any effort to gather friends of her own, or impress upon the school her own individuality, she would have found it easy, and her school days might have been happier. But she still saw herself as the ugly duckling of babyhood, and Alix's creation; and her attitude towards every circumstance was one of intense passivity. Though she still expected, and continually dreamed about, the miracles that were to transform her and bring to her the adventures she read of and imagined, her only deliberate self-chosen activities were in the service of Alix. In this strange atmosphere, in this critical preponderance of youth, she saw herself again through her sister's spectacles, and became again the clumsy oddity that, through her father's half-unconscious agency, she had almost ceased to be. She continued to tumble on her nose at hockey, and fall over the footboard of her desk. The beautiful, the swift, the lordly ones of the school tolerated her for her sister's sake; but she was left in the company of the stupid, the sly, and the unpopular.

So she slipped into a fiery, dreamy, bookish, and disproportionate adolescence; in a world of preposterous shadows, towering fears, strange insubstantial joys, and unconfessed ideals. She had found no rule by which to measure the furnishings of her solitary universe.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUSAN'S memories of school were for the most part of experiences offered to her through her senses. Personalities had already become unreal, and had vanished into a region of her mind remoter than any realm of the imagination. Looking back, this seemed to her odd. For it was the lack of any satisfactory human relationships that had so weighted the days, and provided so many openings for melancholy.

Yet now quick pictures visited her in sequence. The sun on farm roofs, and a number of girls at easels painting; rain dripping down with a continuous freshness on the bright green leaves of a row of lime trees; the white casts of Greek sculpture against the green-washed walls. Her ears caught again the clatter of heels on polished wooden floors, and their muffling on carpet or linoleum. She looked out again through wide windows to a field half-hidden by trees, where the sun on the close-cut grass, and on the white shirts of the players, dazzled and teased the eyes. Through the haze of the lesson she could hear the impact of wooden ball upon bat.

The air grew acrid with the smell of crisp shavings that curled away from the plane; tools sang as they were sharpened on grind-stones; turpentine and varnish and glue flavored the air, as if the Hissop's drawing-room had given place to the school carpentry shed. And now Susan was walking round the garden after rain; wooden seats tipped on their sides, tennis-courts standing in pools of water, the worn patches round hockey goals slippery with mud: and from the many open windows of the music-rooms came the quick, light, rippling sound of a dozen pianos, discord made pleasant on the mild confusing breeze.

The garden was surrounded with elm trees, whose flat rough leaves made a pleasant shade. When other people practised at the nets or walked in little talkative groups round and round the gravel paths, like puppies on a chain, Susan would lie on the bank under the trees with a book. The uneven grasses, left uncut for hay, prickled against her skin, but she preferred their harsh embrace to the false smoothness of a rug. She watched tiny creatures climb steep, slippery stems, bending them with their infinitesimal weight towards the ground. A snail made its way through the jungle of shorter vegetation; one by one the bent blades sprang back into their proper place after the lumbering traveller had gone, leaving a section of each leaf crossed with a sparkling slimy trail. Their shadows fell across her book, and she could remember the pattern they had made, though she had forgotten what she was reading.

Into this happy solitude Alix would come lightly, and immediately Nature, who had been so busy the moment before about her impersonal affairs, seemed no more than a willing background for the proud grace of Susan's sister. Alix's health was troubling Marguerite and Joseph; robustness seemed to be stealing from her, leaving in its place a languor which, though charming, revealed a fine unsuspected network of hidden strains. She was herself greatly pleased with the change; laziness suited her, there were always people to fetch and carry, and there was a greater contrast than ever with the jerky eagerness of Susan. Alix's misdemeanours were passed over more lightly. She was able to indulge in a variety of escapades, from walking out of bounds and fainting in a farmhouse kitchen, to organizing a midnight ghost party in the dark deserted schoolrooms, without any serious punishment — her white repentant face, and the way she had of shutting her eyes quickly, as if the burden of breathing were making her dizzy, shortened even a spoken reproof.

At this time Alix began to form possessive and lazy friendships, setting all her charm to win the individuals whom she thought it would be amusing to attract, and — once she had caught them fast — playing with them for as long as her inconstant affections pleased. Two or three of these girls came home to Hissop's. But once she had them there Alix deserted them for her mother, letting them see that a relationship that was important behind the dull fences of school was measured by a different rule in the unchanging happiness of Sussex. Secretly this delighted Marguerite; but she was an excellent hostess, and tried to make Alix bestow some of her contentment upon her guests.

'Darling, didn't you tell me that Nancy was a great walker? Won't you take her into Seyling and back by the hill path? It would do you good, my dearest.' She rumpled her black head.

Alix lifted round innocent eyes to her mother's. She was lying, more gracefully than any other schoolgirl could lie, in a deep cane chair that they called the 'sleepy hollow.'

'Blessed one, Susan likes walking, and I hate it, and I'm bored with Nancy. You're going to sit here on the window-seat and talk with me; and presently Daddy will come in and he'll scold us both; and then he'll stay and talk, too....'

So Susan would toil up the lanes and across the fields with Alix's glum and neglected companion. Neither of them would have anything to say to the other; and though Susan could have been happy walking alone, she was oppressed by the weight of disappointment that clouded the day for the girl by her side. Yet in this way she managed to revisit a number of secretly beloved places: the stream where kingfishers had once nested, and might be nesting still; the derelict hut in a field in which Susan had once found a battered sixpence, and believed it to have been dropped by the Little People; a thousand flowery hiding-places, or familiar trees, or ponds, or strangely twined hedges. And, since all these friends of Alix's were handsome in one way or another, Susan stole sly pleasures from being with them; she pretended to herself that they were her friends, that they liked her, these magnificent creatures with corn-coloured hair or brown, broad statures or slight, and their scornful manner. She hoped that the cottagers who nodded to her as she passed their gates would think that Nancy, with the limbs of a Diana, or Millicent, with the face of a dryad, were her friends, and they might say to their husbands or families as they all gathered round the polished glowing stoves for tea:

'That younger Miss Pellerin be more sociable-like than she used to be; she be out walking with another of her school friends....'

Marguerite was as youthful at thirty-two as she had been at eighteen; still as gay and bewitching, as prone to impulsive mischief. She now had everything she wanted; Susan was growing out of her clumsiness, and, if she was not either beautiful or quick in conversation, she moved and looked quite well, and was devoted to her sister. Joseph seemed perfectly content to smoke his pipe and play whatever game amused his wife at the moment; he seldom visited his studio now, except to work out a commission, and never went off on his rambling tours of the hills, looking like a tramp in his old Norfolk jacket, with its pockets stuffed full of paint-box, brushes, and pencils. And Alix grew in loveliness with every month that went by. Marguerite loved to play up to a growing imperiousness in Alix; letting her decide the order of the day, choose what they would eat, whether it was fine enough to picnic, whether Marguerite should wear a black frock for dinner, or a gold one. If she saw an occasional glimpse of hardness under this rather charming arrogance, she hid it quickly from her own eyes as well as from other people's.

When Alix went back to school after her fifteenth birthday, she was taken straight to the sanatorium, bright-eyed and flushed, and almost delirious with rheumatic fever. Susan haunted the green-painted door of the ward; then left off going there at all, as other people crowded round it to whisper, and speculate, and leave offerings of fruit and flowers. In deserted corners of the school Susan forgot her secret fears of Alix in a torment of anxiety. On the fourth day of the fever, Joseph and Marguerite came to the school. They were given rooms in the sanatorium wing. Susan spent all the time that she could with them, but Marguerite, though she talked to her, suffered her ministrations, sent her errands, and listened over and over again to her account of the journey, scarcely in reality was aware of Susan at all as her daughter. Joseph was occasionally alarmed at her dark-ringed eyes and tired look; but when he spoke of it she flushed and looked brighter, reassuring him, and wanting no other attention from him than an occasional companionly smile.

Alix kept them a week in sharp anxiety, then took a definite turn for the better. The atmosphere relaxed. People chattered again in corridors, shouted from room to room, whistled as they went about. Marguerite and Joseph packed and prepared to leave.

'Thank you most awfully for taking such care of her,' Mrs. Pellerin said to the matron. 'You won't let them spoil her too much when she gets better?' She went into the darkened room and bent over Alix's bed, taking her daughter in her arms; but Alix put her mother's head on her own shoulder, and stroked her hair, and whispered endearments. Joseph stood at the foot of the bed, smiling at them both with much the same happiness that had so filled him when Alix was an infant in a muslin-draped cradle, and Marguerite indulging her with low-crooned songs before she went to sleep. Susan, waiting in the doorway, was suddenly caught up into an agony of loneliness. She tugged at her school pinafore with nervous fingers. The air swirled round her, black and dizzy; the choking pain in her throat grew so unbearable that she felt that all the tears in the world could not release her from it. When her father and mother came out of the ward, and the matron shut the door behind them, they turned cheerfully to her.

'Look after Alix for me, Susie. Let me know if there's anything she wants.' Marguerite wondered, as she always did when she really thought about Susan, whether it was her family or Joseph's that had set such a seal of incomprehensibility on the child. And suddenly, when it was time for them to start for the long journey back to Sussex by road, and the head mistress was waiting to say good-bye, Susan caught at her mother's hand and bent her head to kiss it. Tears tumbled one after another on to the white ringed fingers. Marguerite tilted the unwilling head upwards.

'Susie, my dear, what is it? Don't you feel well? Is it because of Alix?'

It was not; the agony was entirely selfish, and Susan shook her head. But she could not speak, even to say good-bye. Marguerite tried to soothe her; the waiting people went away to leave them alone; the heavy Dutch clock loudly ticked the seconds away. Still Susan could not speak.

'She's tired,' said Marguerite to Joseph. 'It's the reaction. Mother understands, darling. Be a big girl, now. Think of next holidays, when Alix will be strong and well again, and we shall all be at Hissop's together. Better now? That's splendid, darling. Say good-bye to your father. Oh, what a swollen little face!' She smiled and wiped a tear away with a teasing finger. Joseph looked unhappy, and pushed his fingers through Susan's hair. She looked up at him with what was meant to be a smile, but was as solemn a look as he had ever seen.

'Cheer up, old lady,' he said. 'We'll go for some of our walks again, eh? We haven't done much lately. And you shall start Greek with Mr. Harrowby. You'll like that, won't you?'

The paroxysm was over, and Susan wiped away the traces of it with her father's great white handkerchief. She waved to him as he sat at the wheel of the car. Her mother smiled back, and waved, too. Then there was the sound of the engine, and the hall door was shut again. Susan walked away down the long high shiny corridor, up the polished stairs, halfway up to the sitting-room. From the half-open door came the sound of voices and laughter. She turned back and opened instead the heavy door of an empty classroom. Now she would have liked to cry, but the tempest had left her unfeeling and dulled. She sat there until it began to grow dark.

At ten o'clock that night an urgent message was telephoned to the school. On a steep hill about ten miles from Hissop's there had been a sudden swerve of traffic, a useless grinding of brakes, a crash of machinery. A lorry had swung its great weight on to its side; a smaller car was crushed under it into the hedge. Mr. and Mrs. Pellerin were dead.

CHAPTER SIX

THEY did not think it advisable to tell Alix of the disaster until she should be further advanced towards recovery. So Susan bore the knowledge alone.

Autumn was in the air; for all the patient sweeping of the gardeners, the paths were silted over with drifted leaves. The place was almost intolerable. Here Marguerite had walked; there she had paused to set her foot upon a tree-stump that Susan might tie the lace of her shoe; here on a warm afternoon she had sat with a book, the sun on her hair, the soft wind struggling to lift the pages under her detaining hand. Every one stared at Susan with kind intention, but it broadened enormously the terrible gulf of her isolation. The trees and hedges seemed to stand back from her in the same way. Nobody jostled against her, or shouted at her to come and practise lacrosse; if there were a rustling of wind in a swaying line, it seemed to be withdrawn as she approached, or else the whispering conversation was carried on in the higher branches.

During the first day or two she went about in a dark shadow. Voices that penetrated through to her only did so with a curious sense of explosion.

'You need not attend the classes, unless you want to... like to go to your grandmother... Alix told later....'

But it was a relief to feel the hard wood of the desks unchanged; to see the same maps on the walls of the geography classroom; the photographs of the Elgin Marbles in the library; to hear the familiar voices continuing on familiar themes. Susan would believe herself to have been drugged by the enforced monotony; till suddenly, without any apparent cause, she would realize all over again that her mother would never be at Hissop's; that the hollow rooms had now nothing to wait for, no light figure to hold in a mirror as she walked through, no voice to lift so gaily on the buoyant air. The voice of Marguerite would clearly speak in her ear. And grief would ravage her, shake and trample upon her heart, rob her of sight and hearing.

The nights were a dark and dreadful misery. As she lay awake, the surrounding blackness returned to her staring eyes her mother's face in a thousand moods, in a thousand lights; when she slept, it was to dream of her mother lost, or her mother angry with her, rejecting her, eluding her aching need. Terrible nightmares in which Alix was with Marguerite, in happiness, while Susan in agony could not reach her or make her hear, made sleep a horror and tormented her with shame when she woke. And always at the back of her mind was dread of the future. It defeated her imagination, but the thought of it was a chill that set her physically trembling.

When Alix was told, Susan was with her, holding her hand in a fierce painful grip. Alix turned a white face to her sister, without speaking, and saw in her eyes the days of suffering that had already gone by. 'Daddy, too...' said Alix, as if she could not believe it; and Susan realized that she had been sorrowing all this time for her mother. She experienced a deadening of the spirit now, accepting for the first time the tragedy in its completeness. The sisters drew nearer together than they had ever been before.

Susan that night was allowed to sleep in the sanatorium with Alix. When it was dark they talked; to each of them the other's words were like a surgical needle, bringing a sharp and stabbing pain that performed its own office in the releasing of their nightmare of grief. Susan found herself, strangely, the comforter, while Alix beat her pillow in a tempest of woe; and as Alix's sobs calmed, Susan found herself talking of the life they must now lead, seeing for the first time a pale hope in the long avenues of Time ahead of them, like a faint light at the end of a long tunnel.

'We'll stay at Hissop's, and keep it terribly nice for them, Alix. We'll keep the garden full of flowers and the house polished and beautiful.'

'I can't stay here any longer. What can you do, Susie? You can't leave school yet.'

'I can learn everything I want to from Mr. Harrowby. Daddy — said I could start Greek with him....' The memory of her parting from her parents assailed her and beat all her misery back again. The tears ran quickly down her cheeks in the dark; it was cold sitting on Alix's bed, and the grey light of the window was an awful thing, more awful than the dark itself.

'I'll look after you, Alix. We'll get along, somehow....'

'Oh, Mummy darling, Mummy, Mummy, Mummy...' Alix's cries shook the night.

Mrs. Summers came to the school to arrange what was to be done. She herself was very stricken by her loss; she hoped to find comfort in Alix, but instead she was met with a reserved hostility that puzzled her and made her half-angry, in spite of her pity for the two girls. She had always looked upon Alix as her especial favourite; it did not occur to her that there was something of Joseph in her too, and that in grief

Joseph would immediately have turned away from his mother-in-law. She was driven into a businesslike attitude; but unwillingly, for she was a tired woman, for whom there was now very little pleasure or amusement in life, and she had hoped that Alix would brighten for her the increasingly tiresome days.

'I think it would be better, my dear, if you and Susan came to live with me. You don't want to be bothered with an old-fashioned, uncomfortable place like that.' Mrs. Summers had never liked the spreading untidiness of Hissop's. 'We could go abroad in the spring, perhaps.' Alix would not answer her. 'You would like that?'

Alix looked at Susan, a look that made Susan speak.

'We would very much rather, please, grandmother, stay at Hissop's than do anything else.'

'Good Heavens! child, what would two girls do alone all day at Hissop's? There is no companionship at all for you.'

'We would be quite happy. Mother and father were happy there.'

That stirred an old wound. Mrs. Summers flushed, and thought how unsatisfactory schoolgirls were, and how slow of understanding. She said no more then, but asked them about the length of the term, the buying of black clothes, and the immediate necessary arrangements. Fortunately she was quite of their mind about leaving Frome Court; but for a different reason. She had never approved of boarding-schools, and almost felt that Fate had in a measure restored the balance between her daughter's will and her own in making the children's removal now so simple and obvious a matter. In her arrogant manner, not quite sufficiently tempered with pleasantness, she arranged for their immediate departure.

To leave school when other people were sitting in lessons, when bells were ringing in the ordinary way, when the minutes were filled with preparations for events ahead, seemed so incongruous that Susan felt a beating, childish hope that the whole scene would tumble about their ears before their grandmother's car should take them out into a normal world. She whipped every nerve into a state of intense concentration. Over and over again, as they stood waiting in the hall for the polite farewells to be over, she repeated in her mind: 'This is a dream. Please, God, make this a dream. Make this a dream.'

But even as she said it she remembered the last time she had stood there, between her father and mother, and hope withdrew from her its gentle shield.

The air was suddenly filled with constrained and over-kindly good-byes.

'Good-bye, Susan... Good-bye... write and let us hear how you are... Alix, we'll write to you... think of us for the Wrensbury match... if you ever think we can help you, my dear, you will write to me, won't you?... Good-bye....'

They were in the car, and moving slowly round the bend of the school drive into the wide Buckinghamshire lane, towards the familiar red roofs of the little town in the valley. There, at the corner busy with small traffic, where stood a large-windowed sweet-shop much used by the school, they turned into the main road, and started upon the long straight journey that was to take them to Sussex.

The road was strange to them both for most of the way, and held no hurt. But as the end of the journey brought them to the lanes round about Hissop's, both the sisters were overwhelmed by the pain which lay in waiting for them in the dusky, misted countryside.

Each trembling leaf, each leaning tree, each labourer treading the muddy roads, each cottage with its trail of smoke lying idly upon the air, pointed the way home. The engine of the car slid into a lighter rhythm, a tune of promise. As they swung round bend after bend, 'nearer home, nearer home,' sang the wind in the boughs, the wind through which the car cut for itself a path, leaving behind it a wake of rushing air.

And now they were at the gates of Hissop's. They bumped over the wooden bar from which time and traffic had withdrawn a little the smooth gravel on either side. There was the rushing sound of low boughs scraping against the roof of the car. But the house presented to them a blank and terrible face. Though the windows were just the same, they were dead windows. Though firelight flickered up and died down on the dining-room walls — they were a little before their time, and Penny had not yet drawn the curtains, or taken in lamps and candles — it was fire without life, without warmth or welcome; like a once-amusing man who, with no hope left, sits vaguely with a glass in his hand, recalling past scenes, but with no sparkle of wit in his brain, no light in his eyes.

And Penny, her voice worn to a whisper with tears, moved about like a ghost, pathetically attentive to Marguerite's mother and daughters, as though they might, if she followed them about, give her some gleam of promise, might say: 'Cheer up, Penny, she'll be in in a minute. What are you sorrowing for?'

But the silence of the meal was unrelieved except for the small dead clatter of knives and forks, and the occasional tumbling of logs on the hearth. Susan was so tired that her brain seemed to be moving in two inadequately synchronized halves, so that she registered each small event twice, and each time incompletely. Mrs. Summers sank into a silent gloom, her thoughts entirely in the past. She had never been happy in this house, and it held no memories for her as vivid as those she was conjuring up in her own mind. Alix ignored both her grandmother and Susan, establishing a kind of contact only with Penny, whose poor stoicism collapsed before the touch of Alix's hand as she set a plate in front of her.

Susan's feelings began to be numbed by exhaustion. She gradually lost consciousness to everything except the appearances of inanimate objects — the shining surface of the table, the brightness of spoons, candle-flames diverted into a thousand sparkling points by refraction from a cut-glass water-jug. Then a small omission swept this insensibility aside again.

Every day, with a delight in such things that was as much a part of her as the curve of her head, her smile, or the buoyancy of her step, Marguerite had gone searching for flowers, or berries in their seasons, or — as it would be now — the bright leaves of autumn, to fill a bowl for the table. It was one of those small jokes that never grow stale, except under some strain of ill-temper or irritation; and almost every night, with a humorous ritual, Joseph or Alix had taken a sprig or a spray from the bowl to fasten in her hair, at her waist, or pin at her breast. Then they would all three solemnly toast her:

'To Persephone returned to earth.'

'Children, I give you your toast. Your mother...'

'Daddy, Susan — to the Queen of the May.'

The intimate foolishness had its own variations.

And now Susan suddenly looked round the room in agony, searching for any forgotten plant or flower, any spray of beech or walnut that Penny might have set in water; and, finding nothing, she was again stricken down by such a sense of loss that all other losses seemed to drown in it and swell the tide of realization. And, in that instant, Susan began to miss her father as acutely as she had hitherto only missed her mother.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE next morning was lit with the transparent clarity that sometimes illumines the later days of autumn. At breakfast-time the fire burned brightly, robins and thrushes darted about the lawn pecking here and there for grubs among the roots of the grass, a late wasp darted like a little golden flame about the jam and honey on the table.

'I have had a letter from your father's brother,' said Mrs. Summers, unfolding her napkin and spreading it across her knees with a nicety that showed she was in a mood of opposition; 'it seems he thinks it his duty to come down to take his part in deciding the necessary changes. What is he like, your Uncle Gerard?'

'We've never seen him,' said Alix. She leaned across in front of Susan, spearing a butter-ball with the tip of her knife.

'Don't do that, Alix. Ask your sister to pass you the butter. What made your father choose him for a guardian, then? Surely it's unnecessary to introduce people who are virtually strangers....'

'Daddy didn't take us into his confidence about making his will.' Alix's voice was almost insolent.

Her whole will was subtly bent upon staying at Hissop's. Whether Susan had wanted it or not, Alix had already accustomed herself to a future lived there in independence; she knew very well what kind of life they would have with their grandparents.

'That is scarcely the kind of remark to make.' Mrs. Summers was also tired. It had not been easy for her to wake out of her comfortable idle routine and to suffer this emotional and practical strain. The irritation flickered between them all the morning. But Susan, embarrassed and unhappy, felt a lightening of the spirit at the news of this unknown uncle. She was as surprised as her grandmother at his sudden intrusion; but the knowledge of it relieved her. None of them knew that Joseph had always held the notion that he would suddenly be cut off from life, and Marguerite had been inclined to agree with him; everything in their lives, in their love and outlook on life, seemed even to her optimism to be impregnated with a sense of sweet, sharp youth, with no hold on the future. She had been half-glad to agree with Joseph about the appointing of his brother as an additional guardian.

Gerard Pellerin decided to come south as much out of curiosity about his brother's marriage as from any more sympathetic or responsible reason.

He left his Cumberland house with a thousand repeated directions to his gentle wife about one thing and another that he forgot as soon as the train drew away from the station, to show him unrolling dales and farms that spurred his mind to think about agricultural problems. He felt no sorrows deeply and had so continually thought of Joseph as passed out of his life, that it gave him no shock to hear that he had passed into another. He wondered about his nieces, expecting them to be wild and artistic hoydens; but he was grudgingly pleased with Sussex as a county, having forgotten its charms. His attitude towards his charges improved also; the more since he liked the look of Hissop's, as the cab took him up the curving drive from the gates.

Alix astonished him by her ease of manner and beauty. She came out into the hall to meet him, a tall, graceful creature in her black frock. He immediately decided that he would support whatever line of action she suggested.

'Uncle Gerard, Susan and I are awfully glad you've come. We rather hope you're going to be on our side.' She flattered him with a conspirator's smile, a widening of the eyes that would have been roguish if her whole manner were not invested with a suitable gravity and decorum.

'Couldn't oppose a pretty girl, my dear, in anything. Never could. No wonder Joseph was so quiet about this marriage of his. Didn't want to be robbed of his daughters. Is your sister as handsome as you are?'

Alix looked at him reproachfully, and he felt his joviality out of place. His mood was quickly thrust down. 'Sorry, my dear. A house of mourning. Quite. Difficult to realize, you know, hey?' He put down his hat and stick, removed his overcoat, pushed his hands into deep pockets; took them out again; in embarrassment put them back. He followed his niece into the drawing-room.

'Grandmother, this is my Uncle Gerard.' Alix's manner had about it an air of quiet triumph. The battle, as she knew and as Susan immediately sensed, was virtually over, except for the inevitable skirmishes. Their uncle's whole appearance, his manner and voice, the look in his eye, the cut of his clothes, suggested a personality which meant defeat for Mrs. Summers.

'Madam, I regret the circumstances, but I am delighted to know you. An honour to join in helping these young people through a bad time. Hey? And this is Susan?'

Mrs. Summers instantly disliked Gerard Pellerin even more than she had his brother.

'I regret the trouble to which all this has put you.' Her voice was tart and scornful. 'It seems a pity that any one should have to come so far to settle such obvious matters. However, I've no doubt we shall be able to arrange things in quite a short time.'

Gerard was not listening. He was patting Susan's hand, disappointed that she was less pretty than Alix, but finding out at once all the good points he could about her appearance.

'Hey, I beg your pardon? Oh, quite, madam, quite. No trouble at all. Now take me round your home. A delightful room. Joseph was — fortunate. Very.'

Luncheon was an awkward meal for Mrs. Summers. Susan was sorry for her, and tried to bridge the awkwardness over, but Alix was too subtly intent on emphasizing it for Susan's efforts to be very much good. Gerard from the beginning assumed that the sisters were to be left in solitary possession of Hissop's; asking their grandmother's approval for this alteration or that, provoking her by every sentence he uttered. In the end he provoked her into stating her definite disagreement, and from that moment the battle became open.

He had never seen any one like Mrs. Summers. He looked upon her as a fascinating curiosity, from the jewelled purple velvet band she wore round her throat to the buckles of her restless tapping shoes.

'What do you want to uproot them for, hey? Why shouldn't they be all right here? They always have been.' He prodded and poked her with questions, fascinated by her voice, her manner, the scornful looks she gave him, and her fine angry trembling hands. That evening and all the next day the question smouldered between them. Whenever she was in the room, he stared at her. He outraged her by breaking into sudden shaky laughter, as if he did not care that she had eyes as well as he, and knew perfectly well he was laughing at her. Sometimes he tried to draw one of the sisters into his merriment, as if he would say: 'Isn't she a fantastic piece of goods, hey? No wonder her husband didn't come down with her. Glad to have a rest from her.'

Alix delighted him by slyly joining in the game, baiting her grandmother for his benefit; and as she was far more subtle than he, she was better rewarded, and he enjoyed himself hugely. He did not know what to make of Susan, but he liked drawing her into their private discussions, as if he approved her grave, eager attitude.

'I'll starve her out, hey? Wouldn't that do it, Susie? If I stay here long enough, she'll go. Won't she? Then you'll be all right here, you two. Here, though, won't you be lonely? Come and stay with your Aunt Caroline for a month or two. Hey?'

'I would like to,' said Susan, exploring the adventure in her imagination, 'but I don't think we're going anywhere just yet. Could we later on?' But she knew that she had already experienced all she ever would of a visit to Cumberland, in those few moments in the dark of her mind.

Mrs. Summers stayed four days longer at Hissop's, and then, just as Gerard was beginning to fuss about affairs at home that needed his attention, when the game of grandmother-baiting was beginning to pall, and his wife's daily letters were making him homesick, Mrs. Summers yielded to a secret, weary conviction that her difficult granddaughters would be a great burden upon her, and, worn with conflict, she went.

Gerard Pellerin would have liked to have her mummified and set under a glass case, so that she might for ever be an object of perpetual astonishment and delight.

'Got some sal volatile with you in case the roads are shaky? Take a strong whiskey now before you start, madam. Let me get it for you. No? You'd better take my advice, hadn't she, Alix?' His spirits bubbled up as he watched her suitcases being carried out to the car.

Susan was sorry, and said good-bye to her with affection; even Alix, having got her own way, was attentive and gracious. Gerard waved from the dining-room window until she was out of sight a handkerchief printed all over with a red Paisley pattern. He turned back briskly, and put an arm round each of his nieces, hugging them affectionately.

'That's settled that, then, hasn't it, hey? Grateful to your old uncle? Now let's have some tea.'

The next morning he took himself off with his luggage, a variety of cuttings from the garden, a case of port, and a box of books from his brother's library, and a puppy that Susan, upon an impulse, had begged him to take for his wife. A day or two later, Alix received from him a long letter about their finances, written in a stiff, upright hand, and ending:

'Convey my respects to your grandmother when next you communicate with her. I shall be very annoyed if you omit that message.'

After that he slipped back into the silence from which his brother's will had called him. And that, until his death some three years later, when he left them a variety of curios and precious ornaments, and some valuable books for Susan, was all they ever heard from their Uncle Gerard.

After his departure they were glad to be alone again. As they turned back from the gate, the house seemed to relax a little from its impersonality, and welcome them in. It enfolded them in its atmosphere of peace. Alix liked her new authority, and Penny came to her for every small decision. Susan found at first comfort for her sorrow, and then a source of happiness itself, in the events of the seasons, and in the slight acquaintance of various people in the neighbourhood, who, though they found Alix easier to get on with, liked Susan well enough, and gave her a sense of normality and independence. A great part of her days was spent in studying, and she found her father's friend, Mr. Harrowby, the Vicar, a learned, sensitive, and humorous tutor. She became a contented scholar, and improved at her Greek.

And the sun and rain continued to renew the springing of field and tree, garden and hedgerow, until Alix's coming-of-age, when the elder sister broke in upon their pleasant monotony with the carefully prepared suggestion that they should go to London.

'I know it's lovely here, darling, but it isn't much of a life for us, is it? We'll be a couple of church-going spinsters before we know where we are. I'm — longing to get away, and meet people, and it would be good for you, too, Susan.'

'We can't leave Hissop's, Alix. You don't mean give it up altogether?'

'Well, we can't do very much with our incomes.

If we sold Hissop's, we would have a little money. It's all very well for you, Susan. You're quite happy being down here reading Greek, and going for walks with odd stray people. But you can *see* it's deadly for me. And Daddy would have made us go sooner or later. He always said we'd have a house in London when we were older. Can't you see we must do it? We can't stay here all our lives waiting every day for the sun to rise the next morning.'

'I can't give it up. I can't give it up.' The old grief broke out again; for it was Hissop's that had healed it, and, robbed of Hissop's, what relief would there be? They had a week of arguments, alternately reasonable and stormy. Other people were brought into it; Susan was made silent and angry by their intrusion.

But even Mr. Harrowby forsook her, seeing clearly that, whatever her motives, Alix's plan was a better one for them both. 'Your mother and father were very intelligent and modern people, my dear,' he said. 'They would be distressed and alarmed at the thought of you both wasting your youth and freshness without them here.'

He had another argument in reserve, and it was this that won her over in the end.

'I never thought that you would be lacking in courage.' He spoke seriously, and Susan, surprised at the quick words, looked up at him for his meaning. 'You are trying to drag Alix down with yourself, because you would rather not expose yourself again to hurt. You cannot put life off like that, Susan. You have a very logical mind; can't you see your own muddled argument? You are trying to play the ostrich.'

'I don't want to hide. I only want to keep Hissop's.'

'If you cherish a thing so selfishly, it becomes an instrument for pain. Susan, even if you could make a decision for yourself, you've no right to spoil Alix's life. But you must think it out for yourself. I think it would be worse if you made a decision upon some one else's advice.'

Susan smiled; he was turning back upon her one of her own strongest theories. As she walked home across the fields she put the question sincerely to the test, and knew that the uneasy misgiving that had teased her from the beginning was right. In her heart she, as well as Alix, knew that they must go.

Now, as the pale sun streamed across the floor, Susan turned over the clutter of things that the desks and cupboards had yielded, and started packing them into the empty boxes: strangely neighboured objects — laces and letters, photographs, pictures, oddments of jewellery, and such useless inevitable things as broken scent-bottles, and watches that for years had not been wound. She quickened her actions, trying to shake her mind free from its adventuring into the past; she was very tired with even so shadowy a renewal of old emotions. But before she could quite escape a clear voice suddenly took possession of her mind, so that she stopped completely, compelled to listen to it. It was a gay voice, the voice of her father. She could see him distinctly, in an armchair by the fireside, jumping Alix up and down on his knee, as if she were two years old, instead of a pretty laughing child of eight or nine.

'Ride a cock horse
To Banbury Cross
To see a fine lady upon a white horse ——'

The tears started tumbling down on to the letters in her hand, blurring their faded ink. But the voice went on:

'Rings on her fingers,
Bells on her toes,
She shall have music wherever she goes. . . .'

'Susan! Susan!' called Alix from outside the French windows, 'where are my gardening gloves? Have you seen my gardening gloves?'

'In — in the hall,' answered Susan, struggling to her feet, and brushing the tears from her cheek. 'Wait a minute, Alix, I'll get them.'

But Alix had seen some one who amused her coming up the garden-path. She decided not to bother about the flowers after all.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THERE is very little consolation for the arduous labour of packing, since so soon everything is to be undone again, and at just as great pains. At first Susan had several offers to help with it. The morning after their decisive visit to London they heard a heavy step and a man's voice in the hall, and Andrew Bell walked in.

'Well,' he said, 'Penny tells me you've gone and done it.' He was a tall, shambling creature, with intelligent, sensitive hands, and a trick of blinking, now and again, two or three times in succession, as if it were necessary to clear one's vision of this extraordinary world. 'Penny, I gather, disapproves of you both, but is secretly thrilled to her aged marrow by the thought of going up to Town. Do you want any help with the packing business?' He found a comfortable chair by the fire.

'If you have a moment to spare between whiskey and whiskey, you might help Secretan move the heavy furniture.' Alix took some marmalade, watching with pleasure the slow transference of the golden mass from the spoon to her plate; and then looked up at Andrew with a smile.

'What a low opinion you have of me!' Andrew crushed a cigarette beneath his heel — so large a heel and so small a cigarette that Susan wondered if he were aware of the difficulty and hazard of the task. 'I assure you, my dear girl, that when I work I beat any husky labourer into a cocked hat. Tell me what wants doing, Susan. What is the order of the Grand Removal? Do we start with the attics, or cellars, or what?'

'You'd better take Alix out in the car,' Susan said. She had got accustomed to her solitary work, and was not unwilling to have her days occupied. 'Neither of you would be much good, you know, really.'

And that was the way most of these offers of assistance ended. Sometimes Alix would start upon some of the work — sorting out chests and presses crammed with odds-and-ends, or taking down pictures — and then Susan would find her, worn out with half an hour's labour, languishing by the breakfast-room window. Then Andrew, or Mark Bentley, or the dark-eyed Jennifer Field, who had taken such a fancy to Alix and took no notice whatever of Susan, would come up the drive and see her there, her round throat as white and fair as a blossoming may tree, set off by one of the amusing frocks that she could make so well, when the mood took her.

Jennifer had a few months ago taken the square white house, surrounded by fir trees, that looked down from the hill opposite Hissop's. She was always in and out of the green gates that belonged to the sisters, and she had a way of rising very early and coming upon them before Alix was up, and almost before Penny had thoroughly rid herself of the hanging clouds of sleep. Susan, slipping through a hole in the hedge on her way back with a basketful of mushrooms from the dew-soaked meadow, would find Jennifer on a stile reading a book, or standing in thought at the gate. Even now that there was an air of disturbance and upheaval about the house, she continued to call upon them at these erratic hours, and would often stay to breakfast, and on to lunch; and while Susan, quite happy with her thoughts, packed books into wooden boxes, and linen into trunks, the clear sound of Alix's voice would come through an open window, with Jennifer's in answer; or there would be a pause, and Jennifer would start playing at the piano, half-forgotten tuneful music, with a pliant and easy touch that brought her unseen personality vividly to mind.

The two finest pictures of their mother Alix packed herself. She walked into the bare study a day or two before the end and found Susan surrounded by the motley collection of water-colours and oil paintings that for twenty-five years of sun and dust had not stirred from their places on the walls. Almost jealously Alix searched for two fine miniatures.

'These must be carefully packed,' she said, as if Susan might wilfully have broken or destroyed them. 'They had better go in my room in London. We shall be entertaining more in there.' And she looked at the disheartening débris on the floor, and wandered out again, the miniatures in her hand.

So the days went by. Those people of the neighbourhood who had known the parents came to see the sisters, to wish them well, and to give them offers of help. Susan went over to the Vicarage to seek out Mr. Harrowby. He asked her about their arrangements, and if they had found any lodgers. Susan told him that Alix was seeing to this.

'She is very good at writing letters, and she and Andrew and Jennifer worked out an amusing advertisement. We have had rather fun guessing what they are going to be like from their writing.'

'Very few people realize what an excellent indication that is.' Mr. Harrowby pulled forward a bundle of correspondence from his desk. 'Look now, at that — and that. They write to me for advice. Their handwriting is of the utmost assistance to me. It tells me whether they are easily influenced or stubborn, stupid or sensitive, courageous or weak.' He seemed to be occupying the time with words, but preparing some other speech in his mind. Suddenly he embarked upon it.

'I do not expect you will think very much about any of us when you have grown into your new life. But if you ever want any help with your Greek, or even with non-scholastic problems, I should be very glad to help you, my dear. I shall cherish the hope of your becoming as good a scholar of life as you are of your books. And — I want you to keep this to remind you of the pleasant hours of study, and perhaps to be a consolation to you when human comforters are inadequate.'

He pushed across towards her his worn and precious copy of the 'Iliad.' The Vicar was a gentle, even-natured man, and, though he had found sorrow all about him, no sharp disaster had ever touched his own life: but suffering vicariously had made him very kind. He could have thought of nothing that would have pleased his pupil more subtly.

She thanked him very formally, but he understood her appreciation.

'I shall take it with me wherever I go, the way most people do a hot-water bottle.' They both laughed at that. 'You are coming to our farewell party?'

'I hope so, my dear. We could not let you go without saying good-bye, and Alix has begged us to make it easier for you both by doing so in company.' He walked with her through the grassy paths, the old-fashioned flowers and neatly planted vegetables of his garden, to the little gate that gave on to the meadow. Susan took the field-path with a lighter heart, and turned back to wave to him. As she did so the realization that they were leaving overwhelmed her, the more inescapably since she had tried so hard to stave it off. That was her real farewell to all her childhood.

On the last night Alix and Susan gave their party. It was a warm night, warmer than any they could remember in April; they hung lanterns and lamps at the gates, on the lower branches of trees, and about the empty barn, where they were to dance and eat and drink.

Inside, a sad-faced Penny stood behind a trestle-table, having arranged cups, glasses, jugs of hock-cup and cider, and steaming coffee, with a precision that satisfied her. She had now nothing to do but wait for the guests, and in her melancholy she looked — as Andrew whispered to Susan — like an engraving of the aged retainer waiting for the return of a prodigal son. Secretan swung easily about the barn, moving heavy garden-chairs and settles as if they were matchwood; the reddish glow from the lanterns threw over everybody a new light, and set them against their backgrounds in a fresh context. In contrast to the man's detached and muscular grace, Alix caught from the lanterns a fawn-like glamour, a light mischief not quite true to her nature, a flicker of movement that shot about the long straight frock of green-and-gold, and laid a reddish phosphorescence on her hair.

Behind her, leaning against a beam, was Jennifer, and round them soon was a clustering and shifting crowd of people. Jennifer might have been Alix's partner in this new adventure. One or two of the more casual guests, brought by older friends, thought, indeed, that she was.

'A handsome couple,' one man said to another, 'but not too serious, I should think, about their business arrangements.'

His companion took a glass of hock-cup from the table.

'They have no need to be,' he said. 'I hear they're both well off.' And Susan, slipping past them to join her sister, took the uneasy thought with her that life, in spite of Alix's rosy pictures, was to be no more important now than it had ever been.

Andrew came to find her later in the evening, when most of the guests had danced a little, and talked a great deal, and wished the sisters 'good luck.' Susan, exhausted beyond speech, was still smiling at such of the departing ones as remembered her to say good-bye.

'Listen, Susie,' he said, his eyebrows twitching, his head down-bent. 'Let me know if Alix ever wants me. You might get into a scrape, you know, the two of you, alone. I know she doesn't think much of me, and I am a good many sorts of a fool. But I might be useful some day. And I'd come up like a shot if you wired.'

Susan thanked him, and felt surprisingly happier.

'We wouldn't let you disappear, Andrew, even if you wanted to. Promise to come and see us at once, as soon as we are settled in.'

'I should have liked to come up with you, and give a hand with the things. But Alix won't hear of it, and that, as you can imagine, is jolly well that.'

She laughed and watched him lounge back to the group round Alix. His comical face lengthened to tragedy as he tipped a deep jug up and found no liquor there.

'This is the most unkindest cut of all,' she heard him say, and solemnly — calling Susan over

— he drank both their healths in coffee. Secretan came out of the shadows, and began to clear away the cups and glasses. Penny followed him with a tray, finding those that the man's eyes had missed. Jennifer was bidding Alix good-bye, for they were starting early in the morning, and Alix had a superstition about being seen off at any time.

'Thursday week, then,' said Alix, abruptly linking the old life with the new. And to Susan nothing had been quite so revealing as that binding of old chains on to the unfettered future.

CHAPTER NINE

THE day of the removal was cold, grey, and clear, with rain in the sky and a wind that flung odd scraps of paper about in the streets, and impregnated the air with dust.

The first tenant, who had been forgotten by every one, arrived just as Alix and a remover's man were struggling with a wide table on the twisted stairs.

'Hullo,' said Alix. 'How do you do? Can you push that corner? That's got it. Thank you!'

The tenant and the table arrived in the room together. Miss Ridley was tall and rather odd to look at, with dark, smooth hair, and a brusque, energetic manner. Her eyes were observant and inquisitive.

'You seem to be enjoying yourselves,' she remarked, looking round at the chaos. 'But I don't think much of your business sense. You oughtn't to have taken in your lodger on the same day as yourselves.'

Alix answered with a quick flippant vivacity.

'It's just as well that you see the worst side of your landladies at once. Such a handle for you. You wouldn't like to stay and help, would you? Your own room won't be ready for hours.'

Miss Ridley walked more firmly into the room. If she felt surprise at such a barefaced display of Alix's tactics, it was quickly hidden. Susan disliked the too-easy smoothing-out of her expression, and the blunt egotistical tips of her capable fingers. But in half an hour she had made more difference to the room than Susan or Alix would in twice that time. She watched Alix for guidance, and carried out her directions, a cigarette between her teeth.

'Nice stuff you've got here,' she said, when it was straight, and the old familiar furniture stood strangely up in this unfamiliar house. She stooped to look at the carving and inlay, with an uncommenting interest that was more than æsthetic; as if the gentle surfaces could tell her personal secrets, revealing to her something of the lives of those who had lived among them. Susan was preparing tea. Alix took the tea-pot from her, and made her own infusion, putting in a pinch of the Orange Pekoe that had formed part of the welcoming box of provisions sent by Andrew. Miss Ridley turned to take her cup, and a ray of belated sunshine in its passage across the room showed up the fine network of lines on her face, and the concurrent, deeper engravings that gave her her habitual expression.

'Thank you, my dear,' she said, and looked at

Alix with shrewd penetration. Her thoughts were so busy that it seemed as if they should be visible: they should have taken shape around her, being quite as real as the curtains, the chairs, and the stuffs of rugs and cushions.

Then Miss Ridley turned to Susan, and asked her questions: as to whether she knew London well, and had many friends there; if the other lodgers would be arriving quickly; and if she thought she was going to like this adventure. And each of these questions felt as if it were more important than it seemed; as a fisherman's net, a limp, expressionless thing, has a purpose of its own, and often catches stranger fish than anyone would think.

Meanwhile the men had been busy upstairs. Their tramp was noisier than any bumping of furniture as they came down again, and halted at the door to say their work was done.

'That there bed, madam, in the third-floor front ——'

'Second, Bill.'

'Second, was it, mate? That there me'ogany bed, madam. We've 'ad to 'ave the legs off of it to get it up them stairs. But you can 'ave 'em put on again quite easy.'

'That's all right,' said Alix, smiling at them. 'Thanks very much. Won't you have some tea?'

They pulled off their caps, and walked in. They stood there awkwardly, for all they had been so cheerful and loquacious among themselves. But now their strength was made to look clumsy by the china cups they held in their powerful grimy hands, and they were uncomfortable, being inclined for rough humour now that their job was done, and seeing no prospect of any in their immediate company. They drank the brew as quickly as they might, with much sucking of teeth and wiping of whiskers, so that they might get out again into the road, among men with good loud voices who put no Orange Pekoe in their tea.

When they had gone, and the air was emptied of the clatter of their departing, Alix and Miss Ridley and Susan among them emptied the teapot, without any further conversation. Then Alix suggested that they should look over the house. They came to a temporary anchorage in Miss Ridley's sitting-room.

'What are you doing about dinner?' The first tenant offered them both cigarettes, and lit them.

'What *were* we going to do, Susan? I don't think we'd thought about it.' Penny was not coming up till the next day; a whim of Alix's that they were beginning to regret, for her care would have helped the evening through.

'Would you come up here and share mine?

Most of it will be out of a tin, but quite a reputable tin.'

Susan looked at Alix, but her sister seemed to have gone off into a day-dream: she was taking no notice.

'Won't it be an awful bother? Let me help you?'

'No bother at all. You've got plenty to do downstairs on your own account. Give me' — she looked at her watch, which she wore pinned into a breast-pocket with a true-lover's-knot brooch — 'half an hour. That will be seven o'clock. Will that suit you?'

'That will be lovely,' Susan smiled, and walked towards the door. Alix moved over to the window before following her, and then turned quickly round again. She spread out her arms with an impulsive gesture like her mother's.

'This is life, you know,' she exulted. 'This really is going to be everything we hoped it would be.'

Miss Ridley looked up and down again. 'I'm sure I hope it will,' she said, and set about making order in the dishevelled room.

She gave them a meal of asparagus soup, finely carved tongue, and excellent coffee. She talked a great deal, easily, and in a way that held their interest. They discovered that she had been a journalist, secretary several times over to different kinds of institutions, and was now publicity agent for a variety of matters — for one or two actresses, a firm of publishers, and the London branch of a Paris dressmaker. Then, having told them about herself, she lit two tall candles upon the mantelpiece, and suggested that they should draw their chairs round the fire.

'If you don't know London well, you have chosen an entertaining corner of it. Why did you choose Chelsea? I should have thought that — Kensington — would have been more your mark.'

'Life ——' 'The river ——' said Susan and Alix together, and laughed, since both the remarks sounded so ridiculous.

'How did it happen, Susan? Oh, *I* chose Chelsea because I didn't want to waste any time. It's no use leaving the country to come up to a part of London where it's just as difficult to get to know people. Chelsea sounded far more suitable for two ignorant young women looking for life.'

'Well, what are you going to do now?'

'Put up a notice in the window,' said Susan unexpectedly:

WANTED; NEW ASPECTS OF LIFE
Only good-looking people need apply.

Then she blushed, for she had spoken only half-intentionally. She was not accustomed to taking part in Alix's conversations.

Jane Ridley chuckled. 'It's a pity about the good looks. If you hadn't put that in, I might have applied for the job.'

Susan grew more confused; but Alix laughed, and leaned forward to poke the fire.

'Good looks,' she said, 'have uses of their own. But I'm not insisting on them, even if Susan is. What are your terms?'

'I never take any money till after a few days' trial. Will that suit you?'

'Excellent!' They both laughed as if at some great secret joke. 'We'll start to-morrow. Or are you busy during the daytime?'

'Not to-morrow. We could start with a tour of the neighbourhood.'

'What fun! That's a bargain. You've got a lot of books, haven't you? Have you read them all? Susan's got a lot, but I don't believe she reads half of them.'

'I don't get very much time for reading. But they're most of 'em pretty dog-eared all the same. Once, when I was out of work, and very hard up...'

The story was followed by another, and that in its turn was capped. Darkness had long ago enveloped all the room behind them, though none of them had been aware of its near approach. The candles above their heads burned with a clear light, for the windows were closed against the weather, and the smoke of the cigarettes mingled with the flames, and spiralled round the room into the night.

It was Alix who got up at last, and reminded Susan quite sharply of the time. Miss Ridley rose, too, with a punctilious courtesy that Susan had noticed before to be very characteristic of her, and said 'Good-night' quite calmly, as if Alix's sudden impatience had not been seen. It was to Susan that she addressed a reminder of their appointment for the next morning; but Alix, at the turn of the stair, halted in the dark to listen, forgetting that her head was sharply outlined against a window.

She was extraordinarily good-tempered for the lateness of the hour and the arduous day, and she helped Susan with all the small business of getting to bed — filling hot-water bottles, finding their dressing-gowns, setting toothbrushes and powders about in orderly array.

'Come and sleep with me, Susie; your room is frightful,' she called sleepily when the last pillow had been retrieved, and all the lights turned out. Susan, on bare silent feet, went first over to the window, following the track of moonlight that lay levelly upon the floor. She looked out with joy upon a night cleared of clouds, and illumined with stars. The moonlit river slapped at the sides of moored barges, and thin trees shook in the buffeting of the wind.

Then, shivering with a sudden chill, she slipped quickly into bed.

CHAPTER TEN

It was a week before any of the other tenants were due to arrive, and that week, for both Susan and Alix, was crowded with events.

Jane Ridley was an excellent guide. Susan grew to respect and like her, forgetting her first mistrust, as she took them here and there on her very original tour of London. Susan was aware of it all as a necessary prelude to adventure, but she had no idea when her own adventure was to start, or what it would be. Alix already seemed amused, stimulated, and quite content with what the days were bringing her. Susan had never known her to walk so much, or listen so long.

'Come along, now,' said Jane, shutting the door behind them as if the house belonged to her, 'we'll start by way of the Embankment. I'm not Baedeker, mind. I don't intend to tell you the history of the Abbey. Anything you want to know, you can look up for yourselves. I'm just presenting the panorama.' Under her brisk and interesting direction every house and individual, from an ugly and newly built public-house to a bored old loafer of about sixty-five, who was leaning over Battersea Bridge chewing the remains of his breakfast with a regular rotatory movement of his stubbly chin, was invested with importance, as being part of an intercommunicating and diversely patterned scheme of the universe.

'Look, now,' Jane would say, suddenly swinging round on her heel, 'd'ye see?'

And whatever it was she pointed out immediately shone the more brightly as a link in this fascinating chain. She took them to lunch in Chelsea, to tea in Knightsbridge, to dinner in the City. From the tops of buses they looked into banks and offices, where the down-bent heads and the papers and stacked files seemed as indelicate a revelation as a woman discovered in her underclothing. Miss Ridley seemed incapable of exhaustion; and though Susan grew tired, she was elated with the excitement of discovery. Alix watched both of them with amusement. Occasionally she would insist upon stopping.

'Go on, you two. I'll sit here until you come back. I'm going to talk to the pigeons.'

Yet both of them felt a loss without her, as if it were partly Alix herself who lent glamour to the experience. And when, bored with so much regarding of people and inanimate buildings, Alix passed in front of a shop-window in Oxford Street, looking critically at the tea-gowns and silver slippers and fans, Jane joined her and shared her interest.

'Attractive, aren't they? I like that gold one particularly.'

Susan could not imagine Miss Ridley in a gold tea-gown; but Alix nodded without surprise.

'You've got good taste,' she said. 'It's the nicest thing in the window.' She hummed a little tune as they continued their journey. She was remarkably contented with these days of sight-seeing.

Susan already knew limited parts of London: the stores, and the British Museum, the Tate Gallery, and a few of the theatres; but all these places were isolated in her mind. She could not have found her way from one to another. Now, though her memory could not hold them all, she began to realize London as a town of infinite tiny ramifications. She liked the little streets, the irregular roofs, sudden bay windows, jutting railings, crooked chimneys, surprising shops. She grew intimate with certain small areas, not because of any great usefulness, but because she liked the look of them, or the atmosphere. For pleasure, on two afternoons in which Alix and Jane had gone off together, Susan walked through endless back streets where children swung upon lamp-posts, cats strolled in contented sovereignty, women with round red arms talked at doorways, and from every other house came the tinny sound of a gramophone, or someone playing on the piano, or voices raised in quarrelling or conversation. All these people, with their busy lives, gave her a sense of independence and friendliness; she would have liked to be offered a cup of tea in one of the aspidistra-garlanded sitting-rooms, and would have dared to invite herself in but for the restraint of shyness.

When she got home again she found Alix and Jane sitting by the fire. The first afternoon they had spent, after all, indoors; on the second occasion they had been to a *matinée*. They were talking — Susan heard the word as she went in — about love.

'What were you saying about love?' she asked, taking a piece of bread-and-butter from the table, and slipping into her accustomed position of audience upon the floor.

'What do you know about it, young woman?'

'Susan doesn't know what it means. You've never loved anybody, have you, Susie?'

'I'll bet she has.' Jane had a twinkle in her eye, but her lips were pursed to gravity.

'I've just heard something of it. In a street near here there was a man who was drunk, shouting at a woman to go to hell, because, if she loved him, he didn't love her.'

'He's a quick drinker. It's only half an hour after opening time.' Jane seemed to derive great consolation from her watch. She was always opening its little round case and snapping it to again.

'Love,' said Alix, lazily, stretching her arms above her head, so that the firelight fell upon the smooth shapeliness of them, 'is like whiskey. The more you have, the more you like it; it's the nicest possible way of drowning your troubles.'

Susan had no idea her sister knew so much about it. She considered her with interest.

'I think,' Jane countered, and more seriously, as her sharp voice showed, 'it's like the kind of merry-go-round you get at a fair. When you're not on the damned thing, you'd give your eyes to be on one of the horses. When you've paid your twopence and the music starts, you get the thrill all right. That's what you wanted. But there's only one way of getting off again, and that's when the music stops. And it's either too soon for you or too late; and if you take a risk and jump off, ten chances to one you break your neck.'

'Oh, ho,' laughed Alix, 'how bitter we are! Has it been burnt, then? Or does it want to jump off already? Susie, have we stumbled on a dark and sinister secret?'

Susan was not listening; she had been captivated by the image.

'They say that once you've really got to like the smell of a fair, you can't escape from it. That's why fair people always can make a living. People hear the music, and they can't resist it.'

'Yes,' said Jane, dispassionately, the feeling gone out of her voice. 'I believe that is so. Odd, in such an age of sophistication.'

But Susan felt as if Jane had made her a present of a key, a key by no means new, or particularly bright and shining; but one which she was particularly glad to have in her hand. She felt that possibly she might quite soon be needing it; and though she realized that she was placing ridiculous emphasis on a not really very inspired or original remark, it took a fast hold upon her imagination.

At the end of the week two of the other lodgers arrived together — Ciceley Craig and Hermione Allen — with a small collection of luggage, whose excellent quality flaunted their superiority and exclusiveness. They were prepared for many kinds of landlady, but not for Alix; and her beauty, hauteur, and lazy lack of interest in their affairs — which was largely assumed, for Alix was very curious — disturbed both of them, and made them anxious to inaugurate a cordial relationship.

'*What* a charming house!' cried the ladylike Ciceley, standing with her hands on her thin hips, and her head on one side. 'And *what* lovely things you've given us, Miss Pellerin! Hermione, have you ever *seen* such an adorable corner-cupboard?'

'It's very attractive,' answered her friend, but uneasily, for she was a comfort-loving creature, and sensed hostility in Alix; and, having enough wit to perceive that forced enthusiasm was not likely to break down the barrier, wished that Ciceley would cease chattering, and trust this problem to the more capable hands of time.

'I hope you'll find everything you want.' Alix spoke lordlily, for she knew that she had furnished the rooms with almost embarrassing completeness. 'And if there is anything you need, ask my sister or myself. Mrs. Penny is our housekeeper. I will send her up, and she can help you with your unpacking, and show you the bathroom, and so on.'

When she had gone:

'There is only one thing I don't quite like about one's landlady really being a lady,' said Ciceley, fingering the silk of the curtains, and turning up a Rockingham dish to look for a mark. 'I hope it won't be embarrassing if things aren't quite as we like them.'

'I should imagine,' answered Hermione with melancholy, 'that one could always settle it through the housekeeper.' And she turned a suitcase over on its side, and started the business of unpacking.

Miss Craig and Miss Allen made no impression upon the house. They fitted immediately into an easy routine. They were called at seven, one bathed at five minutes past, the other a quarter of an hour later. Penny — who was very happy now, though it had taken her some days to allow her satisfaction at being in London to show itself — cooked their breakfast, and Rose, the red-cheeked Chelsea girl who came in every morning to help, took the two trays up to their rooms. Miss Allen would be dressed; Miss Craig, who liked dallying with all her pleasures, would still be dressing, her hair in a little lace cap, a lavender silk dressing-gown hanging loose from her shoulders. At eight o'clock, or soon after, Miss Craig left the house. Hermione Allen, with scholastic hours to keep, had no need to hurry. Their rooms were swept and dusted, their slippers — the one pair small and dainty, the other large, but neat — were settled in their respective cupboards. It was seldom that anything was left about in their rooms. At six one came home; the other at seven. At eight they dined, upon whatever Penny had chosen to cook for them. At nine they might both be found sitting quietly by the fire with a book, or writing letters, unless one of them had dressed with mild excitement and flurry, and gone out to dine or to a theatre. As 'aspects of life' they were a disappointment. Jane twitted Alix with her lack of perception.

'If you dispense with an interview, you must be very shrewd at taking in a letter,' she said. 'You've crashed there, my dear. Unless you are interested in the spinster as a breed.'

But the fourth room — which the remover's men would have described, economically, as the second front — was still unoccupied. The day upon which Miss Amorel Farrow was to have arrived came and went without event. The next morning a telegram explained that she was held up on the Continent, and would be several days late. In the intervening time a succession of trunks, suitcases, parcels, notes, telegrams, and flowers arrived for her at the house.

'Oh, Lord, what have we let ourselves in for?' Alix, discouraged by her last two ventures, was half-amused, half in despair. The telegram was followed by a letter, written in a round, dashing hand, on a sheet of purple note-paper, posted in Spain. Susan liked the look of the luggage, and said so; it seemed to her pleasant and friendly, with its collection of battered gay labels, and its general air of weary cheerfulness. Jane was pessimistic, and was not really disappointed when she discovered that she would have to be away for the day of Miss Farrow's arrival.

'I'm getting too staid for ladies who use violet ink and purple note-paper,' she said. 'You can tell me all about her in the evening.'

But when Miss Farrow actually was in the house, all they could see of her was an enveloping fur coat, a black hat pulled down over one eyebrow, and fine silk stockings that showed through them the gleam and glitter of a gold chain anklet.

'How *do* you do?' She held out a kid-gloved hand. 'How *frightfully* nice of you to take me in like this! Have you ever *heard* of such appalling luck as I've had! Missing the train at Barcelona, and then a perfectly *frightful* crossing. Oh, Miss Pellerin, what a relief to be here!'

She pulled off her hat, and turned to give brisk directions to the taxi-driver and street-lounger who were bringing in her luggage.

'Up to the second floor, please. Be careful of that case, it has china in it. You would never believe the trouble I have had with that Spanish tea-service!'

Miss Farrow, flinging open her coat, swept the sisters into conversation. Both Susan and Alix found themselves smiling. There was a simplicity about this overwhelming woman that she would herself, with horror, have disowned. Under all her gesticulation, her powder and paint, her theatricality, lay a transparent wish for friendliness. Susan was fascinated.

'Shall we come up and show you your room?' asked Alix, in a sudden generosity.

'How charming of you! What a *marvellous* staircase!' They paused while she admired it, bent her head to look at the banisters, touched the polished wood with an outstretched finger. All the way up she talked, half turning back to them, stopping now and then for an emphatic phrase, taking little running steps, hurrying up the last flight.

'Oh, my dears, what a *frightful* time you must have had with all my maddening possessions! Have you loathed me? Honestly, I had no idea there would be all these things. Now who could have sent those roses?'

Miss Farrow stood, frowning, a finger to her lips.

'Roses. White roses. It must be Jeremy. How adorable of him!' She strode over to the table and unwrapped the delicate unseasonable blooms; pricked her finger with a thorn, muttered a curse, frowned, sucked the finger, exclaimed again at the loveliness of the flowers, forgot her pain, and opened a large brown-paper parcel.

'"From Max and Simeon." The lambs! Now what can it be!' Brown paper hid the floor, string trailed from the table. 'Oh, what a disgraceful give-away! Now, *isn't* that unfair, to label a poor girl on her very first day by sending her whiskey!' Miss Farrow's chuckle was rich and delightful; Alix shared the joke with Susan.

'Now,' said Miss Farrow, determinedly, going to a cupboard, 'if you have been so very kind as to provide me with anything to drink out of —— Ah, yes, two glasses. Now you must both have a drink with me to celebrate this — ah — great occasion.' Susan looked sideways at her sister; her training had not included the assimilation of promiscuous whiskies. But Alix, laughing, was accepting the hospitality; and Susan, with panic in her heart, took her dose like a man.

'Cheerio!' cried Miss Farrow, and drank the toast from a flower-vase that had been standing empty. 'Cheerio!' answered Alix, now frankly and friendlily laughing. But Susan, for whom the world was rocking a little on its foundations, did not feel composed enough for speech, and contributed instead a wave of the empty glass, and a smile.

When the two sisters — Alix casually, Susan with a hardihood born of the whiskey (for the staircase seemed dark, the stairs uneven, and the house filled with an extraordinary singing and dancing of light), took their way downstairs again, Jane had come in, and was making a salad.

'Oh, Jane, she's delicious. Do go up and make some excuse and see her. Her hair and her clothes and her anklet. Oh, *do* go up!' Alix gave herself up to delight.

But Jane, instead of answering, went over to Susan, and took her by the shoulders, and set her in a chair.

'I'm sure she's delightful; but if you've got a head like a rock yourself, you might look after your sister better.' Jane's voice was grim. She returned to the making of the salad. And so the introduction of Amorel, which had begun so merrily, was a little overclouded, except for Susan, who for ever after associated with their golden-haired lodger something of the supernormal lightness and confidence of her first acquaintance with undiluted spirits. And not until the pleasant confusion had left her, and ordinary objects seemed a little darker and more melancholy for the withdrawal from them of the glamour lent by whiskey, did Susan realize that she was in some way the cause of an irritable conflict of mood between Alix and Jane.

That evening the sisters, leaving Penny to see to the domestic arrangements of their lodgers, went out together in search of a place to dine for the first time since they had been in London. Alix, who had been sharp and depressed, with a sudden perversity seemed bent upon cheerfulness.

'Andrew told us — do you remember — about a room by the river where all Chelsea drooped about between candles? I wonder which way it is.'

Susan had turned to the right, and for once Alix followed her. The weather was warmer now, and it was low tide. Three or four small boys, silhouettes in the distance, were clambering over the stranded wreck of a barge. Gulls dotted the river, sundry craft, and the parapet of the Embankment with a spray of white. Women stood talking in the street.

'Oh, you oughter 'ear 'er, she goes on something awful. A-screaming and a-shouting she was, at one o'clock this morning. And 'im no blooming use with 'er, not one bit 'e ain't...'

'Makes yer tired, don't it? Why don't 'e get rid of 'er?'

A beautiful and well-dressed woman walked past the speakers without being aware of them; a creature in another world. Close at her heels was a mongrel dog, sniffing at her skirts, hopeful of gain. Two boys on bicycles, free-wheeling down a slight incline, shouted from one to the other:

'What's got Charlie, then? Why ain't 'e coming?'

'Taking 'is girl to the pictures. Whoopee, 'Arold!' And the second passed the first with a frantic pedalling, ringing his bell in a frenzy, with attention to spare for a wink at Alix and Susan walking so circumspectly on the pavement.

They found the restaurant, but it was nearly empty; the candles, which had flickered and smoked as they entered, the flames blown this way and that by the draught, made Alix the focusing point on the picture, so that everybody there looked up at her. She felt their attention, and enjoyed herself greatly; she seemed to become more vivid as she sat there, until her skin shone more luminously, her head made a darker shadow, her eyes caught a subtler gleam. It said much for her good humour that, although the food was poor, her enjoyment was unimpaired.

When they came out, the streets were suprisingly light. It had seemed so much later in the evening, the other side of the blue-net curtains. So strangely were they suspended between dusk and darkness, so suddenly made intimate with one of the most secretive moods of Nature, that Susan could have stretched out her arms without self-consciousness and embraced the trees as they stood, the gulls in their flight. She was born to the house as if she walked in a dream; and Alix's step beside her, and the little tune she was humming, were part of this rare delight.

So the days, that for Alix were filled with stimulus and excitement of one kind, were for Susan enriched with another. But it was not until she got into bed, in the little room next to Alix's, that she was visited by an unexpected melancholy, which she traced to an uneasiness in her own mind: since all these joys, these moments of revelation, had no continuance nor pattern in her life; nor was there anything to sustain the events of the days with any system of clear and permanent values. She remembered Jane's picture of the merry-go-round, and felt very much indeed like a child who listens to the music and watches the bright dazzling splendour, and longs to take part in them; but, though she clasps the money tightly in her hand, she has not the courage to go up and demand her turn of the showman, nor does anybody take the trouble to ask her what it is that she wants.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

On her first morning at the Chelsea house, Amorel Farrow was wakened at eight by Rose. She opened one eye, and stirred beneath the bedclothes. A magnificent wave of yellow hair, escaping from a pink lace-cap, was all to be seen of her.

'Breakfast, Miss,' said Rose, patiently.

'— Down ——' said Amorel.

Rose, obedient, set the tray on a table by the bed, and went out again. Amorel returned to sleep.

At nine she woke, yawned, straightened her cap, and patted her hair — though there was no one to see her — and stretched back comfortably upon her pillows, hands clasped behind head. From her window she could look far down onto the river, and she watched the few craft at work upon it without taking any particular notice of them, her thoughts busy about matters that were making her smile, and sigh, and frown, in turn. Then, perhaps it was that they came to a natural stop, or perhaps the battered tug Crow broke into her musings as it gave a loud clear call on its siren, and started bending back its funnel as it neared the low arches of the bridge.

'My God,' said Amorel, suddenly, aloud, 'it's half-past nine.'

She looked at the breakfast-tray. A wish that the coffee were hot, a regret that she had not wakened up sooner, and a fear that the two sisters would be slighted by the return of an untouched tray to the kitchen, visited her in turn. A gull, breaking away from the circular flight of its fellows, nearly alighted on her window-sill, and suggested a means of disposing of the egg.

'Come along, my beauties,' called Amorel softly, scooping the shell clean, and spreading the contents on the sill. Soon fifty gulls or more were swooping in turn upon the scattered crumbs, and Amorel, completely self-forgetful in her delight, sat up in bed in a transparent nightgown, while errand-boys and workmen, some ten or twelve children, and several passers-by stared up from the street at the whirling birds, which were filling the air with a daze of white, like the old nursery story of Mother Goose shaking her feather bed.

Now Amorel was completely awake. When the last scraps of egg had gone, and the fickle gulls departed again to scavenge the oily waters, she pulled about her a bright silk wrapper which looked voluminous enough, and yet somehow contrived to expose a good deal of her plump pretty person. A little later, from the bathroom came a rich, fullthroated song, a succession of trills and tricks, a scattering and expanding of tune, that by its simple exuberance brought a smile to the faces of Rose and Penny, the man who was cleaning the windows, Susan, Alix, and even Jane Ridley, who was returning to her own room after a breakfast shared with the sisters.

'Blow, blo-ow, thou-ou win-ter wi-ind,' sang Amorel, splashing as she sang.

'Thou art not so un-kind
As man's ingrat-itude,
As ma-a-an's ingra-atitude.'

When the bathroom door was opened again, the house was filled with a largesse of warm and perfumed air. Amorel carolled in small breathless phrases as she went upstairs, and there continued until the problem of choosing the day's underclothing from the muddle of silk garments, flung into a chest of drawers, absorbed and silenced her.

As she brushed her hair her thoughts were busy about the things she must do, the people she must see. Before she was dressed, the first of her visitors had called to see her — Jeremy Small, a young painter whose fine inspiration struggled with a delicate body for control over his easily wearied energies. She called to him to come in before she had realized who it was. Seeing him, she pulled her wrapper closer about her, then forgot it, and opened her arms wide to embrace him.

'Jeremy, my lamb, how are you?'

'Amorel, you're thinner! Really! I know I'm very early, but it was my only chance to-day. No need to ask how *you* are.'

'*You're* thinner. Seriously. H'm. *Food*, I think, for you, young man. From now on I'm your doctor, and I prescribe three heavy meals a day, and *no* coffee. A stern hand for you, Mr. Small. Come and sit down.'

Again she hugged the flowing silk kimono round her, and in her high-heeled, gilt slippers tip-tapped across the room. The divan had been made while she was in her bath, and Rose had enveloped it in a pink-and-blue chintz cover that at first seemed incongruous among Amorel's silks and satins, and sweet heavy scent. But as she sat there, with Jeremy in a green basket-chair opposite her, something in the innocent prettiness of the flowery pattern showed as a suitable background for Amorel's skin, and colouring, and contented smile.

'Tell me about everybody.'

'We're all very glad to have you back. The whole gang is coming round to see you, so you'd better get out of that delectable garment, darling.

Simeon and Maxine have been to Stapley, but they came up yesterday. Viola hasn't worked for a long time; haven't seen very much of her.'

'Racketting round?'

'Well, perhaps, a bit. We've none of us seen a lot of her, somehow, lately. Do you remember Oliver Rand? Was that before you went?'

'The young man who ran away from home and took the rooms poor old Gladys had at Mrs. Braun's. Yes, I remember. What about him? He was a bit of the gay Lothario, wasn't he?'

'Yes, rather. But he's quite a good sort, and very amusing. He's been about with us a good deal lately.'

'Viola fallen for him?'

'Oh, I don't know. Cherry says so; but you know what Cherry is. She will talk about people. I think she makes up half of it.'

'You're a loyal soul. May my reputation never fall into worse hands than yours! Now tell me about yourself.'

They talked for nearly an hour, of themselves, and their illnesses and health, of Jeremy's work, and Amorel's new room, and their plans for the summer. Then Jeremy, after saying he must go at intervals of perhaps ten minutes, actually did get up, and collect his hat and stick, and walk towards the door.

'Good-bye, Amorel. When are you going to have your house-warming party?'

'But my dear boy, this isn't my house. How can I?'

'Don't be silly. Who cares whose house it is? Ask the landlady. What's she like?'

'Oh, they're very nice, rather dears, and very pretty. But I don't think...'

'Well, do think. We can't let you off. We'll all do it for you, if you start backing out. I think it ought to be — next — Tuesday. A nice day, Tuesday. Eight o'clock. I'll come and mix the drinks for you ——'

Laughing, he was down the stairs before Amorel's expostulations could be coherent. Left to herself again, she laughed, too, happily, liking very much this tempestuous welcome home. She finished dressing in a mood of great content. She was unpacking the case of Spanish china when her next caller knocked at the door.

'Amorel, darling ——'

'Maxine ——'

So the day went by; and by the time that evening was upon the streets, and the lamp-lighter woke first one tiny flicker and then another to a round yellow glow in the haze, Amorel was sitting at her desk in a warm, comfortable room, brightened with many pictures and cushions, signed photographs, rugs, shawls thrown over chairs, and with only one bare space, which, to-morrow, would be massively filled with her piano, withdrawn from its months of storage.

She was covering the purple notepaper with an easy pleasant stroke of the pen.

'Jeremy insists,' she wrote, 'that there must be the usual house-warming — though there's only one room, so it will be rather a squash. But you will come, both of you, won't you? The usual attractions: Johnny Haig, Mother's Ruin, and all the rest of it. Longing to see you ——'

She signed the note with a flourish, and added it to a large pile already waiting to be posted.

'Well, Amorel, I'll say this party is the best ever. Cheerio, old thing!'

'...Another record on, somebody. Carol!'

'I don' believe've ever kished anyborry in'r life. Have y'now? Honesinjun?'

'Just another little one, Jeremy, thank you!'

No furniture was left in the room except the divan and the piano. In one corner of the room, on a pile of cushions, sat an American woman with a smooth, white face, and a scarlet cigarette-holder that jerked out from her scarlet lips. She was playing an ukulele, sharply, rhythmically, adapting its monotonous twangings to the changing tunes on the gramophone.

'Cherry,' said the young man sprawling at her feet — though he was speaking to a red-headed girl the other side of her — 'I adore you, Cherry! Max, make Cherry sing another song!'

Amorel was here, there, one minute hidden behind a group of her guests, the next focussing the attention of the room — except for one or two people too intoxicated to focus upon anything — with a remark, a story, or a laughing sally. The dark starry night flung the gold of the drawn-back curtains into sharp relief, and showed the curving lines of human bodies, the contrasting colours of their hair and skin and clothes, and a medley of mirrored reflections from the walls, in bright juxtaposition, like a painting vividly impressed in water-colours on wet paper.

'Amorel!' cried Jeremy from the door. '*Amorel!* Viola is going to do the shimmy!'

'Viola!'

'Look out, George, make a space for her!'

'I say, who said I was going to do the shimmy?'

'Of course you are. Come along, my lamb.' Amorel pushed a number of people to one side. Alix, who was standing by the fire — which had been allowed to get low, as the crowded room grew hot — turned to the man beside her with a whisper: 'What a magnificent creature!' The girl they called Viola, tall, handsome, flushed with dancing and with excitement, a glass of sherry in one hand and the other set defiantly on her hip, swung into the open space with a swagger and faced them all, tapping her toe to the rhythm of the tune; looking round at them with the half-sulky, half-provocating stare of forgotten Southern ancestors, powerful and defiant among the paler characters, the cooler blood, of the rest.

'Sing for me, then! Start me up, Jeremy!'

Jeremy squatted on the floor, cross-legged, and started clapping in a steady rhythm. He broke into a mumble of words and humming; voices here and there took up the tune; Maxine found it with her ukulele.

'High, high, high up in the hills,
Just watching the clouds — roll — by...'

A man at back of the room gave the view-holloa. Viola was swaying to the lilt of the song, her feet dancing a conventional patter, till the rhythm caught her up out of the neat swift steps. 'Go it, Vi!' cried the American girl, plucking out a deeper and more primitive note from the strange heart of her instrument: she was leaning forward from her cushions, her manner and her will, as much as her playing, urging the swaying girl on. Now Viola was bending backward from the hips, now from the knees; now the muscles of bare legs and thighs rippled as if they were laden heads of corn swept by a rain-burdened wind. Susan, sitting on the divan under the open window, was fascinated and excited, completely self-forgetful, drawn by the girl's movement into close communion with the feeling of the night in a way she had never known before. She could have cried out with joy — not so much at the twisting, rippling, sinuous human flesh, for she was scarcely aware of it; but at the dissolving of the different elements in the room into one fluent whole: as a thousand sparks of colour, flung into the air upon a Catherine wheel, are transformed into a whirling pattern of fire.

'Marvellous, Viola! Go on! Faster — faster!'

'This,' thought Susan, 'must be something like Jane's merry-go-round. I wish she need never stop — that the tune could go on for ever ——'

But when Viola had spun into her last frenzied gesture, and finished her performance, when the clapping was over, and she had emptied the glass of sherry in bold triumph, and the space cleared for her had disappeared again under advancing feet, the unity she had given the party held, like an invisible chain. A girl who, behind her twenty-seven years, looked out from the innocent-seeming eyes of a child of ten, and had been flirting and drinking in the shadowed space behind the piano, jumped up now and pushed the boy who was with her into the centre of the room. They started to dance. Alix and Simeon Carlow, the husband of the guitar-player, followed them: Alix supple and lithe in the arms of the big American, a bright light of success shining from her like a halo.

'Isn't Maxine going on with the ukulele?'

'Amorel! Wake Maxine up again!'

'Jamie, come on. This is a topping tune.'

'Blue skies, shining on you,
Nothing but blue skies, all day through...'

Another tune beat out on the warm, bright, smoky air. It danced beyond the room, out of the window into the night. Somewhere out there it reached a stoker aboard a tug, stirring him to the same mood, turning his thoughts to the girl he had kissed last night in the deep-shadowed narrow streets of Greenwich; so that he, too,unconsciously joined Amorel's party. The tune sought out something hidden in the heart of the night, something that seemed out of keeping with the still trees and the river, and was yet part of them. Susan, forgotten and wrapped in excitement, gave herself up to these discoveries, for she felt as if she were touching the very secret pulse of life.

'Poor little rich girl,
She's a bewitched girl,
Tum-tum-te-tum tum...'

Her eyes and her cheeks were lit to a flame. She looked around at one and another, dancing, flirting, talking, drinking. A voice spoke very close to her:

'They're right, you know. This *is* rather a good tune. Shall we dance?'

Susan turned round to see a young man lounging upon the divan beside her, with amusement in his eyes. The clatter of the room seemed suddenly to have dropped away into silence, as if, upon the striking of a bell, everything had vanished and left her floating, alone, upon the stream of music to this encounter. They stood up and, dizzy, she felt him steady her. Then she swung into the rhythm of the tune upon the arm of Oliver Rand.

The lights dazed her eyes; dancing, her limbs. She was completely lost to all sense of time, circumstance, or proportion. Had the entire population of London crowded silently into the room to stare at her, she would have moved unconsciously among them, as one moves, without sense, in a dream. When the record stopped, he stood grinning down at her. And at the look in his eyes, and the quick confident straightening of his body, and the smile he gave her, that thing happened for which she had been waiting for, without knowing it, for a year or more: Susan fell in love

The party was still a party when Susan, waiting her opportunity to say good-night and 'Thank you' to Amorel, looked round again at the now dishevelled room.

A couple of broken glasses, and another rolled over on to its side, had smeared the top of the piano with a variety of liquors. Susan could not see Alix; did not know whether she had long ago gone down to bed, or whether she might still be somewhere among the guests. Two people still were dancing; the red-headed girl called Cherry, her eyes closed, a cigarette hanging from her lips, and the boy who had been following her about most of the night. Jane Ridley, who looked as though she were putting a grim face upon melancholy, held a glass half-full of whiskey and was talking to a man who — as Jeremy had told Susan earlier in the evening — knew more about the restoration of oil-paintings than any one else in Europe. On Amorel's divan about six people were in various stages of intimate discourse.

Yet, occupied as they all were, Susan felt a common interest stir them as one and then another noticed her standing in the doorway with Oliver. She felt the uprising of pride in him, and knew that he liked their attention, though he hid it under mockery.

'Shall we make them a bow?' he whispered. 'We seem to be causing some excitement.'

She laughed; knowing herself to be stared at, no shyness seized her, but rather a feeling of freedom and extreme confidence, as if she and Oliver were regarding the world from a great height to which no one could reach, not even with envy. She knew herself to be buoyant, floating lightly upon a tide of delight, secure in a new poise. She did not want to let him go, even for a moment; yet knew that he would go, and she would not care: for he would come back.

'It's absurd,' Oliver was saying into her ear. 'I don't even know your name, you flibbertigibbet.'

'Don't you think that's rather fun?'

'Not if I don't know where you live.'

'That,' said Susan, returning to him his mockery, 'you could possibly discover from Amorel.' And, without testing the moment further, with a little bow she left him, and ran quickly down the stairs.

CHAPTER TWELVE

At ten minutes past nine the next morning, Susan, who had been lying awake for over an hour, got up and went into Alix's room.

The curtains were drawn close; through them a bright sun forced a pallid light. Confusion had laid a hand upon everything from floor to ceiling. Pictures had been pushed awry, furniture stood unfamiliarly in awkward situations, cupboard doors gaped open and showed more confusion, and everywhere were clothes. Susan collected odd garments from the floor, the chairs, the table, and even from the knob of the door. She put them all tidily away and blew a mist of powder from the mantelpiece. Then she pulled the heavy curtains aside and waited for Alix to wake.

Two women were talking in low voices just below her, on the pavement.

''Course, I says to 'er: "Don't you go coming to me," I says, "expecting me to carry yer troubles for yer. Got enough of me own, I 'ave, without dirtyin' me 'ands with other people's."'

'Got a nerve, anyway, asking yer a thing like that. You'd 'a' thought she'd 'a' knowed something for 'erself. 'Er sister Elsie would 'ave 'ad a baby at sixteen, she would, if she couldn't 'a' looked arter 'erself better'n that.'

'Vulgar, I call it, a-trying to mix up respectable people in such a sicherwation.'

Agreed, they stared, silent, at the sparkling river; the one with her charwoman's apron rolled up under her arm, the other in the torn, old coat she had put on to see her child as far as the corner of the road, on its way to school.

Susan, following their unseeing glances with less preoccupied eyes, forgot their conversation — drowned it, almost — in joy of the river. While she was staring at the gleaming ripples, following one another so quickly on their way to the sea, Penny opened the door and, moving exaggeratedly on quiet, slippered feet, looked round for the disorder she expected to find. Instead she saw Susan.

'Have you tidied up, then, Miss?' Her wrinkled face looked very old in the bright light; a face with a soft and gentle expression, growing so quaintly — as the years went by — more and more like the child she must once have been. 'Oh, thank you. Did you enjoy yourself last night?'

'Very much, thank you, Penny.' Susan smiled. 'Did we disturb you?'

'No, Miss. I liked the music. But Miss Allen and Miss Craig — I think it kept them awake.'

'Bad-tempered, are they? It is rather awful, if we did keep them awake. They both have to work all day.'

'They haven't said anything to me, Miss Susan. I haven't seen them. But that Rose, I didn't ought to laugh at her, but she does imitate people so — she's been making me hold my sides in the kitchen. But I think it was more because they hadn't been invited.'

Alix stirred on her pillow.

'What are you two gassing about?' Her voice was husky with sleep.

'Off with you now, Penny,' said Susan, teasing her and trying to make her run; 'let's have breakfast quickly.'

When Rose and the tray arrived, Alix woke up properly. The sisters sat for some little time in silence, their thoughts busy in a more or less desultory way with the people they had so suddenly and so intimately met.

'Well, for the first entertainment in our house, I think we might call it some party. Jane can scoff about aspects of life if she likes.' Alix swallowed the last piece of toast and lay back again in bed.

'What time did you come down?'

'Somewhere about four. I don't quite know.'

'Had — everybody — gone?'

'About half a dozen people left. Susan, did you notice a tall, fair man with a beard?'

Susan's heart had played a trick on her, sending the blood racing through her veins. Self-conscious, she had expected Alix to embark upon a description of Oliver. She composed herself.

'With a lavender-coloured handkerchief that he held in his hands all the time?'

'Yes. His name is Ralph Truscott. He's an artist. He wants to paint me.'

'What fun, Alix! Where's his studio?'

'In Tite Street. He said a good deal about that young man Jeremy you were talking to such a lot.'

'Oh, did he? Tell me.' Susan was pleased and interested. She had at once liked Jeremy, and had understood his diffident charm, his affection for his hostess. Alix looked at her curiously. She wondered if Susan were being wakened up at last.

'He says that Jeremy Small is going to be the greatest genius of this generation.'

'How — frightfully nice! Do go on. What else did you find out?'

'Lord, Susie, how excited you are! Somebody been whispering sweet nothings into your ear? Your blushes give you away, my dear. Oh, I found out heaps more things. To begin with, Amorel is an actress — in patches — when she wants to be. She has a "friend" who's an art dealer and an expert on old paintings and things.' (Susan had a quick, vivid memory of the man's face as she had seen it last night, half-hidden by Jane. She wondered what had happened to Jane, and why she had not come down to breakfast with them.) 'He pays her a steady income as a sort of investment, and takes it back in profits while she's working.'

'I'm glad she has something solid and comfortable like that. I like Amorel awfully.'

'You're rather condescending, my child. So does everybody. And her legs are insured for a preposterous amount of money. That's why she wears an anklet.'

'Oh, Alix, what fun it all is! What a tremendous amount you'll have to tell Jennifer. She comes up this week, doesn't she? And Andrew?'

Alix's expression changed at once. 'I've put Jennifer off. It's rather a nuisance having people so soon, when we're not really settled yet. And I shall be busy with sittings for my portrait for a week or two — Ralph says he works very quickly, but I expect it will take some time to do.'

'What about Andrew?'

'Why are you so interested in Andrew?'

'Oh, Alix, don't be ridiculous. I'm not "interested" in Andrew. But he's awfully fond of you, and very nice, and I think it isn't fair to hurt him so.'

They were both drawing towards one of the stormy quarrels that had always flared up between them about one thing or another — a toy that both wanted, or, as they had grown older, a subtler dissension. But now Alix was held off any real annoyance by her surprise at Susan's new decision of manner, by a poise that revealed an unsuspected firmness and grace in her.

'I'm not cast for a healer of broken hearts. You can take it on if you like.' Her tone was mild and the tension relaxed. But as Alix turned back to the pillows again, with a lazy clinging to comfort before she must get up, and Susan walked across to the window and perched upon a chair, following the inconsequent wandering of her thoughts that seemed to lead continually to Oliver, the elder sister mused upon the new influences that were tugging them both away from their youthful moorings. For Susan, clearly, was changing, too....

In various rooms, here and there about London, other people were similarly spinning into the fabric of the day the warp and woof of the evening before. Simeon Carlow was lying in his bath, studying with complacency the well-manicured roundness of finger-nails and squareness of toe-nails; feeling proud of the healthy pink glow of his skin; and thinking that, even if he was getting fat, he had stood the party pretty well for a man of fifty-four. And that good-looking girl in green, with the black hair, had found him quite attractive enough to flirt with...

He smelled the soap he was using and in disgust — recognizing his wife's perfume — pushed it out of the way and found his own. In his head a tune from the night before was running like a squirrel in a cage, and to its simple emphasis he adjusted his movements.

'Who'll mend a broken heart,
Who'll take a victim's part —
Won't some one hear me?
Is no one near me?
Who'll mend a broken heart?...'

His wife, lying still asleep, was dreaming a dream that puckered her eyebrows, hurried her breathing, and made her stir restlessly under the bedclothes. Simeon, walking on tiptoe past her door, woke her by his fiery curses as he stumbled over a mat.

'I say, Maxine, I didn't wake you, did I?'

'Oh, hell!' said Maxine, and pulled the blankets up over her ears with a determination that could not bring sleep back or hold off the headache that was already knocking behind her eyebrows.

So their day started.

Viola, heavy-eyed, was counting over twelve shillings, a sixpence, and sevenpence-halfpenny in coppers that were scattered over a table.

'How long,' she was thinking, 'can I exist on that?' She looked round the room for something that she might possibly be able to sell; but that way out had served her too often — there was nothing left to sell, except a gold photograph-frame on the mantelpiece. Across its corner an inscription was written. 'Why,' thought Viola, 'did mother get the damn thing engraved?' She turned her back on it, and on her own thought about it, and started making coffee on a gas-ring.

'Damn! I shall have to work again!' she said, suddenly, aloud. And, drinking the coffee strong and black, she finished dressing and went out, slamming the door behind her.

In the street was a hawker selling daffodils and tulips. The sun was high and the air fresh and clear. Buses, bowling along at a great pace, were like red dragons out on some smooth and determined warpath; houses titillated the imagination with their windows open to the sun, their bright or faded paint, their smoking chimneys, and their bland expression of shrewdness and secrecy. Viola's mood lightened, and she swung into a rhythm that made people turn to look at her, so sulky and magnificent a creature with a step like a prancing horse. Oliver Rand, turning into the King's Road, saw Viola ahead of him. Overtaking her, he saluted her and fell into step.

'You're up very early.'

'Hullo. So are you. Don't put me in a bad temper again. I was just recovering.'

'Don't be so waspish. You can't expect a bright conversational opening after a night like last night.'

'Lord, what a party.'

'Lord, what a shimmy!'

'Look here, Oliver, are you being offensive?'

'You *are* short this morning. I admire your shimmy immensely — as you know.'

'Thank God for it, anyway. I'm hawking it this morning.'

'Work again? Why do you do it?'

'Bored, that's all.' Viola jingled the pennies and silver in her pocket. 'You lazy devils don't know what you miss.'

'The dignity of toil. I admire you, Viola. I always shall.'

'I hate your early morning humour.'

'It's not humour. I mean it. You're an inspiring creature for any one to meet on a fine May morning. Perhaps it's because you do work, occasionally.' Oliver struck an attitude, and two people passing by turned curiously to look at him. 'You're like a broad, fine meadow full of buttercups and daisies.'

'That — from you! After all this time! You almost persuade me to wait and hear if there's any more coming. Oliver, you must be in love again!' She laughed at him, raising her eyebrows in a familiar and comprehending way. 'Go and talk to the sea-gulls about it, my dear. I must catch this bus. Come round and tell me later on.' She waved to him, and then turned to run after and jump onto a bus already moving away from the kerb. Oliver, staring after her, could not make up his mind whether to follow her or her advice. As he waited, the bus departed from him, and he found himself standing still in a moving stream of people. He turned towards the river. Viola's words lingered in his mind.

'She's probably right,' he thought; 'it feels very like it.' Susan's dream-entranced and flower-like face — her little pointed chin, and eyebrows as fine as the antennæ of a moth — was very ready to his mind. 'Now, I wonder, I wonder what Providence has up its sleeve this time?'

He walked along, humming, his thoughts chasing one expression after another across his face — now a grin, now a scowl, and now a curious look, half content and half inspired, which was less the outcome of thought than of a mood. Halfway up the street he decided to feed the gulls, and he turned back to buy two stale sponge-cakes from the baker's shop at the corner. Then he went on again between the grey houses. A charwoman in a red apron was scrubbing a flight of steps; behind the neat curtains of the next house the white cap of a housemaid moved between window and table, table and door. In front of him the fine sweep of the bridge caught up the breath with a promise of an unknown land the other side. Battersea must, thought Oliver, have vanished in the night and given place to a kingdom of the clouds. He turned round by the huddled black shapes of cabs waiting on the rank.

'If Viola's right again, and I'm in love, it's different this time. I wonder what she's like, the queer little thing?' He walked to the edge of the Embankment and leaned upon the parapet. The gulls swerved towards him, but he had forgotten what he had come there to do, and the bag of sponge-cakes hung limply from his hand. 'I ought to leave her alone. Somebody ought to lock me up. I'm crazy.'

He looked down and discovered the paper bag twisted between his fingers.

When he had thrown the last fragment into the air, and emptied the bag inside out to scatter abroad the crumbs, he had made up his mind to go and see Amorel, knowing that his whole purpose was to find out Susan's address. He was not sure of the number of the house, but recognized the look of it.

In that second Susan had seen him.

Alix had gone out. Susan, as if a thread of lightning had suddenly touched her, was wakened again to the mood of the evening before. With confidence she leaned across from her chair and released the catch of the gramophone. The record that was left on the disc gained speed, and she set the needle on it. A burst of jigging melody escaped from the room to Oliver, waiting in the hall.

'Poor little rich girl,
She's a bewitched girl...'

Oliver laughed aloud. He forgot that he had asked for Amorel. 'The gods are with me,' he said, and knocked confidently upon the door. Susan was standing by the gramophone, waiting.

'Hullo,' said Oliver, 'that's our tune, isn't it? I knew it must be you.' And, grinning, he waited to see how she would welcome him.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SUSAN was no longer a spectator of the joys of the merry-go-round. It was her turn now. She did not care whether or not the showman was still cajoling, wheedling, encouraging, shouting to the crowd, for she was no longer in the crowd, but above it. She clung to the bright-gilt pole that supported both her and her painted steed, and looked down in ecstasy on a new world.

Life was shot through with colour and variety. She woke each day to a freedom, a sense of adventure and an anticipation of joy that were strong enough in themselves to attract to her the delights she wished for. Yet she did not know that she was in love; only Oliver held that knowledge, both of himself and Susan. For Susan was happy to leave her state of mind unanalysed, only admitting, with an innocence that delighted her lover, that since Providence seemed to have given her a pair of rose-coloured spectacles, she intended to wear them, so that should disillusion overtake her, she would at least have done very well out of the illusion.

Now every small event of the day was impregnated with delight, and every tiny encounter — a baby sprawling on a doorstep, a tree twisted against the sky, men playing concertinas, houses, smoke blown down by the wind, or a pot of geraniums on a cottage window-sill — added something to the roseate hue of the spectacles; and this bright illumination fastened itself about Oliver like an aura.

Alix was very busy about her own adventures. She wondered occasionally at the sudden flowering of Susan's charms, but accident had put a wrong clue ready to her hand, and she thought, amusedly, that while she herself was advancing towards a flirtation in Ralph Truscott's big studio, her sister was probably making her own acquaintance with romance in Jeremy's smaller, ruder, poorer habitation. She suffered no anxiety, knowing Susan too well. But everybody else, from Amorel to Viola, and even Jane Ridley — who kept very much to her own room, and saw little now of any of them — knew what was happening, and watched with amusement, interest, or sympathy, according to their natures.

But the person to come nearest to a true comprehension was Jennifer Field.

On the fourteenth of May — a month since Hissop's had been left behind in the bend of the Sussex road, its windows curtainless, its gardens already desolate, waiting for new owners — Miss Field arrived at Victoria Station.

Since to do an odd thing pleased her always better than an expected one, she shook her head at the crowding taxis which were all ready — like a fleet of toy boats waiting for a breeze — to take her wherever she would go, and found her way by bus to Chelsea.

So it was that Alix, who was expecting to hear the horn of the taxi as it turned away from the river, and the grinding of brakes as it stopped in front of the house, was caught quite by surprise, and was, at the moment of Jennifer's arrival, busy about a letter, having made fairly sure that Miss Field must, since she had not already arrived, be coming by a later train.

When she heard Jennifer's voice in the hall, she caught up her pen and papers, and called for Susan.

'Look after Jennifer, Susan. Say I'm ill — no, out — oh, anything you like. I'll be back quickly — I promise I won't be long.'

The air was still agitated by the hurry of her departure when Penny showed the visitor in.

'I'm terribly sorry,' said Susan, holding out her hand. 'We thought you must have caught the next train. I think Alix has gone to meet you — or to look up trains — she won't be long. Do sit down.'

Jennifer smiled. She understood Alix far better than Susan did, and her ears were not deaf to the scurrying disturbance of the atmosphere. But she was interested in Susan, wondering why she had never noticed how attractive she was, and puzzled to define the difference in her. When Alix came back, Susan and Jennifer stood up together as if they were close friends rising to greet a little-known acquaintance. Alix looked from one to the other in surprise.

'I'm glad you haven't been bored, my dear. Has Susan entertained you? She is getting such a conversationalist that she will probably have told you more in half an hour than I shall in a whole week. How are you?'

She took her favourite pose — in the great winged armchair by the fire — and prepared to take Jennifer to herself again. She had looked forward to the visit with embarrassment; but in this changed atmosphere was determined to recover the thread of friendship that she had let slip perhaps too idly. Ralph Truscott was waiting for another sitting, which Alix had not troubled to put off on her friend's account. But a smile touched Alix's lips as she imagined him waiting there, expecting her, and she would have settled comfortably by her own fireside for the day if Jennifer had not surprised her by arranging otherwise.

They talked for a few minutes without real interest, all their thought occupied far more with an unspoken conversation than any spoken one. Then Jennifer saw Alix look at the clock, and made it an excuse.

'What were you doing to-day, Alix, if I hadn't arrived? Please don't start, after all these months, to put yourself out for me.'

Alix put all her charm into her smile, and into the pretty gesture with which she leaned forward, and laid a hand on Jennifer's knee.

'My dear, of course I'm not doing anything. I know Susan's going out — aren't you? — until dinner-time. Shall we stay here — and talk?'

Jennifer made no answering movement; she swung an idle foot lightly, and asked her next question of the fire.

'What about that portrait?'

Susan, feeling both the conversation and the subtle conflict of wills to be outside the social attitude required of her, poked the coals, and looked at the weather, and wondered how soon she might escape to Oliver, who was waiting until she should call for him, when they would both go out to lunch.

'I shall be perfectly happy here,' Jennifer's quiet voice went on, 'and, under the circumstances, wouldn't it be a little ridiculous for you to miss your appointment?'

Alix was confounded, not knowing what suggestion to adopt, or what answer to make, for the best. Then Susan realized that under her cloak of calm Jennifer was extraordinarily moved, and she spoke upon impulse.

'If Jennifer wouldn't be frightfully bored, we'd love to take her out with us.' She turned to Miss Field. 'It won't be exciting; we're only going to a restaurant in the King's Road. If Alix really ought to go.'

'That would be charming of you. But don't let me upset your arrangements, Susan. I really would be extremely comfortable here with a book.'

'Of course not. That settles it, then, doesn't it?' Alix got up with a sudden irritation, moved a cigarette-box on a table, adjusted a picture on the wall. 'We'll all meet again for tea.' She was slowly recovering her poise. 'You're sure you'll forgive me, Jennifer?'

She did not wait for an answer, as if she were half-afraid Miss Field, given such an opening, would speak her mind, but closed the conversation with a smile. As she moved about the room, finding gloves, a hat, lipstick, powder, a handkerchief, the scent she used was released upon the air. It hung there when she had gone. Ralph Truscott, who was expecting Alix with a certain impatience and anticipation, wondering exactly how far he had caught her heart, and how far her vanity, adjusted a little more romantically his flowing artist's tie, and looked down between crimson curtains into the street. Oliver, whose curtains were of undyed linen, was occupied in the same way. As they both stared at a landscape empty — for each of them — of interest, Chelsea was drenched in a sudden shower of rain. The wind beat the swift drops into a tattoo on the pavement, trees were swept this way and that; stray cats and dogs, a nursemaid with a baby in Tite Street, and a couple of women coming back from market into the blind alley that engrossed Oliver's attention, scurried before the storm, heads downbent, blindly rushing for shelter. Windows were banged down, doors slammed, taxicabs appeared here and there, already shiny with rain, and sped along the streaming streets.

In five minutes the sun was shining again, and Alix opened the door of the house in Cheyne Walk. The cook and the kitchen-maid next door saw her legs walking quickly past their window.

'There she goes again,' said the cook, 'in her fourteen-and-elevenpenny stockings. My word! I wouldn't be *her* sister for somethink.'

'Oh, I think she's lovely,' said the kitchenmaid. 'Real pretty, Mrs. Brent. Now you can't say she isn't. And she 'as a nice smile for yer, too, if yer meet 'er in the street.'

'Smiles,' muttered Mrs. Brent, 'is easy come by.' And she turned her back on the window.

A few minutes after, Susan and Jennifer went out, too.

They found Oliver painting a black stool red in his little sitting-room, whose bow-window was so close upon the pathway that they could have shaken hands with him from the street.

'I'd given you up,' he said, speaking to Susan, but scowling sideways at Jennifer. 'Were you afraid to come out in the rain?' He opened the door for them.

It was a pleasant room, with cream-painted walls, red cushions, and a very few pieces of comfortable and graceful furniture. Round the inner window-ledge he had set his pots of paint, on newspapers; more paper covered the floor in a not very adequate attempt to keep splashes from the green carpet. Susan introduced Jennifer, but Oliver seemed ungracious.

'How do you do?' he said, formally, in a gruff and mumbling way, as if to warn off any too-observant interloper. Jennifer noticed the sharp and vehement lines of his mouth and chin, the nervous fingers, and the contraction of his humorous uplifted eyebrows. Having put the introduction, and with it Jennifer, behind him, among already forgotten events, he turned all his attention to Susan.

As he talked to her, Miss Field watched them both, and knew why it was that Susan had seemed to her changed. Now Susan was very shy; her easy confidence, which had so marked her manner when she had talked to Jennifer, had given way to a quick, sensitive grace, as unconscious as an aspen leaf in autumn which waits for the breeze that will release it from the tree.

Oliver was disputing with her as to where they should lunch. He looked in as bad a temper as he could be, deliberately untidy, uncouth, and ill-mannered. With the toe of his shoe he was pushing a wet paint-brush nearer and nearer the edge of the newspaper on to the carpet; when, with the last expected lurch, it rolled over, spreading the green with red, he grinned in as pleased a fashion as a small boy who has tricked his elders. His ill-humour lightened a little.

'Come on, then, Susannah, leave that nice mess alone, and let's go and feed. If you want Jacopo's, I suppose we'd better go to Jacopo's. But why old Mother Gawk isn't good enough for us to-day I don't know. You shouldn't bring your fine friends here if they're too fine for Mrs. Gawk.'

Susan flushed, and would have spoken in quick answer, but Oliver continued at once:

'All right, you needn't apologize for me. I'll do it for myself. I beg your pardon, madam. The devil got the better of me. There. That's all right, isn't it? Powder your nose, baby. It needs it. If you start walking along the road, I'll be with you in a minute.'

The sunshine had almost dried the pavements again; only the damp, dark earth of window-boxes, the damp-stained sides of houses, and occasional runnels of water between unevenly cemented flag-stones, showed that a shower had been.

'Susie!' cried Oliver's voice behind them, 'look at this for an emblem of our respectability!' And he waved at them a pair of yellow gloves that were as foolish as the red nose of a clown would have been upon such an individual.

Behind the sedate white curtains of the restaurant they ordered mushroom omelettes, crisp brown rolls and butter, and beer; yellow Pilsener, that cooled their thirst before they drank of it. Oliver had hoped that Jennifer would refuse the drink; but, though she did not greatly like it, she was determined to give him no advantage.

It was another glass of lager, brightening the shadows of the far end of the room, that drew Susan's attention to Jeremy, who was eating the rump steak prescribed by Amorel, and was huddled over a book.

'Jeremy!' called Susan, as loudly as she dared from behind the barrier of her own shyness. He did not hear her. 'Jeremy!' cried Oliver, in a peculiar cracked sort of cackle that did not penetrate even so far as Susan's voice had done. Then he picked up a roll, and, with a light of pride in his eye — for he knew he was a good marksman — he sent it the length of the restaurant, and so woke Jeremy to their presence.

He was happy to see them. He waved in reply, hurriedly set a paper in his book to mark the place, and brought his beer over to their table.

Jeremy was a kind of Robin Goodfellow to their party; his eager, interested manner, his courtesy and simplicity and flickering humour woke them all three to a better temper, making conversation easy. For the rest of the meal Oliver was as pleasant as any one, wishing to show him off, could have wished him to be. He talked about books, and the Tsar, and Charlie Chaplin, and life on a coaling-barge; making ridiculous links between irrelevant topics. He made Henri, the waiter, grow confidential, and talk to them about the village in Provence that was his birthplace — 'where *les Saintes Maries* landed, and with them *Sainte Sara — mais, oui, Mesdames*, it is true — in the sixth century...' He spun two florins round and round like a couple of devil-dancers, on the table-cloth. He made Jennifer drink an extra glass of beer, and then:

'Confess,' he said, suddenly, breaking into an impersonal conversation which had grown up between them on the technique of Laurence Sterne, 'Miss Jennifer Field, confess that you had that beer to spite me, and that you don't like it at all.'

But she would give him no satisfaction, and they wrangled their way out of the restaurant and into the street, Oliver's tenacity and sudden blind rushes easily outwitted by Jennifer's maturer ease of manner and her detachment.

Susan, seeing them interested in their ridiculous duel, did not listen to them, but indulged instead in the habit of losing her thoughts in almost purely sensuous observation — a habit which was growing on her. She felt the sun on her cheek where the brim of her hat no longer cast a shade, and she delighted in the warm touch of it; she realized and experimented with the elasticity of her own step, so that walking became an adventure made up of the stretching and contracting of muscles, the poise and progression of weight. The people, and traffic, and shops; the sky and the outlines that stood up against the sky; the clouds and the scraps of paper, the fruit-stalls and coloured coats and hats and frocks, the gloss of the burnished coats of horses, and the weighty carts they pulled — all these things she received in a delicious visual experience before she submitted them to the analysis and separate appreciation of her mind. She was astonished to feel Oliver's hand upon her arm, and to find them laughing at her as she went her own way onwards after they had stopped at a street corner to discuss where they should go, and what they should do, next.

'Come back, flibbertigibbet,' teased Oliver. 'Jeremy wants to say good-bye.'

'I don't,' said Jeremy. 'He's lying to you. But I've got a lot of work to do, and I think I must get on with it.' He was divided between the urgency of his inspiration and the pleasure he found in their company — a conflict that was very familiar to him, for he was a sociable person.

After he had gone, the ungracious mood descended again upon Oliver, for he was realizing that he would not see Susan alone. But Jennifer gave them a moment or two to themselves, while she walked to the edge of the Embankment and watched the busy remote life of the men whose days are spent on the river barges. She found herself liking Susan, and an impulse to defend her was so instinctive that it surprised Jennifer herself; for at present it was not very clear that any defence was needed. When she turned round, to find Susan at her elbow, and Oliver gone, she could not have remembered any of the sights of the river that she had been watching with such apparent interest, so complete had been her absorption in the events developing around her.

They found Alix in a state of almost dangerous good temper, a mood that instantly woke Jennifer from her thoughts, and Susan from her happy detachment.

'What a long day you've had! Has my little sister been showing you all the sights of London?' Alix wore a cherry-red tea-gown as naturally, and as graciously, as a tree wears its bark. She offered Jennifer a cigarette, and lit her own; the flare of the match showed her to be smiling.

'She has been introducing me,' said Jennifer — and Susan, surprised, saw her knuckles whiten — 'to some of her very amusing and delightful friends. How goes the portrait?'

'Oh, very well. Awfully well, to-day.' Alix rang for tea, and disposed herself gracefully on the divan.

Silence fell between them, like a mist, through which neither Susan nor Jennifer wished to break; but Alix was in no mood for mercy, and soon started pricking them again with the small barbs of her conversation.

'Oh, Jennifer, I've asked one of our lodgers to come and have tea with us. Has Susan told you about her? Jane Ridley. A most — original person. I think you'll like her. Won't she?'

'Very much.' Susan was angry with Alix, pitying Jennifer. If the sisters had been alone, they would quickly have been quarrelling. 'She's awfully nice, and was very good to us when we first came here.'

'*Very* good to us.' Alix's eyes, finding Jennifer's, were full of amusement.

'I believe Susan mentioned her in a letter to Andrew.'

'The ancient feud is ended? You are friendly with Andrew?'

'Andrew is an intelligent young man. You can enjoy his company without being what you so pointedly call friendly.'

Alix laughed this time. She had provoked Jennifer to open irritation.

'Don't be so sharp, my dear. You'll frighten poor Jane away again, if you snap at her as rudely as you snap at me. Susan, do you think Penny's gone to sleep over the tea-pot?'

In silence Susan got up and rang the bell. Now Alix allowed the silence to remain, and amused herself by making smoke-rings, and watching them as they moved slowly about the room, fragile phantoms inspired and controlled by her breath. The clock seemed seized with an extraordinary wish to hasten one second upon the heels of another; its ticking loaded the air with unrest. Susan felt that there must somewhere be a battle between the elements; the atmosphere was heavy with storm.

Then Jane Ridley walked into the room with her firm easy stride; her smooth head and compact figure the most controlled and purposeful object in the room.

'Oh, Jane,' said Alix, walking over to her, and putting a hand lightly on her arm, 'may I introduce you to Miss Field?'

Jennifer looked very straightly at her. The day had been, as Susan had suspected, an emotionally tiring one, and she had no wish to meet Miss Ridley. But she was astonished to see, in the queerly flecked grey eyes looking into hers, a ghost that was brother to one who walked continually at her own shoulder; a ghost of twisted affections, pride, and disillusion.

'How do you do, Miss Field. I have heard a good deal about you.'

'I am very glad,' said Jennifer, with quiet sincerity, 'to know you.'

And Alix, once again that day, had the discomfort of knowing that her plans had gone awry.

Jennifer had been invited for a week; and she stayed for a week. At the end of that time she told the sisters that she had found the experience so amusing, and the days so eventful, that she had decided to look for a flat or small house, so that she might spend her time alternately in London and in the country.

She had been about a good deal with Susan, but greatly, also, by herself, being accustomed to solitude, and easily entertained by the quiet observation of other people. Nevertheless, Alix had been made very uneasy by her presence.

Jennifer's personality affected the two sisters in very different ways. Alix had known neglected love turn to disillusion before; but never before had the changeling clung so persistently about her path. Now and again, perversely, she would have liked to exercise her old power and charm over her friend; and now and again she was almost sure that Jennifer's affection had not died at all, but smouldered still under a veneer of composure. Alix's serenity had never been so disturbed; she was distracted from full enjoyment of the days, and worry lay uneasily at the back of her mind. As she sat on the model throne, heavy green curtains behind her throwing up the lights of the flame-coloured frock in which she was being painted, Truscott would frown, pause, stare at her impatiently, and then startle her by calling her name:

'Alix... you've lost it ——'

'Sorry — it's the weather. *Must* you go on painting *all* the morning? Couldn't we have a rest? I'm so terribly tired ——' And she would smile at him so effectively that she beguiled him from his work, to flirt with her, and flatter her, and wonder about her, until he had driven uneasiness out of her thoughts into his own.

'You must be one of those people who have twice as much electricity in them as the rest of us,' he would say, fingering the gold of her frock. 'You're as disturbing as the threat of lightning. What happens when there is a storm? Do you burn people up?'

'I'll visit you next time there's a storm, and you can find out — if you dare risk it?'

'You're a little devil, aren't you? You won't let one alone. You won't let me paint you properly, or make love to you properly, or even hate you with any satisfaction. I wonder which you want most — a portrait or a lover?'

'What a curious alternative! Must one choose? Couldn't one have both? A good many people do.'

'Not from me. You put a spell on my brush so that the damn thing won't work for me. Aren't you ever going to make up your mind?'

This kind of thing was life to Alix; it brought out an artistry in her that would have delighted a student of manners, giving power to her wits, and wizardry for a weapon to her hand. And it kept at bay her inner conflict.

To Susan, Jennifer brought great relief. Oliver was still very non-committal in his speech, making no attempt to rouse her to an expression of love; but he was continually about her, appealing to her, fastening her to him by subtle intricate strings. His moods of confidence — not unlike Alix's — delighted her; in the shadow of his popularity she was as content as she had been, for so long, with her sister. But confidence alternated with a depression and diffidence that, as he conveyed to her clearly, only she was able to lift; and these occasions actually gave her pleasure, for, though she was hurt by his suffering, it gave her great joy to have him turn to her so spontaneously for comfort.

But Jennifer had discovered a house to be let in a narrow street leading off the river — a house with an air of aloofness that suited her. She had had its slatted shutters painted scarlet, and its walls washed yellow; and here Susan would come to escape from her own too-urgent thoughts. Jennifer asked her no questions; having, indeed, very little need to, for most of her difficulties were very apparent, and much to be expected.

There grew between them a pleasant intimacy. Susan took Amorel to the house in Church Street, and sometimes Oliver and Jeremy would accompany her. Occasionally Jane came in for tea, or after dinner. The house was impregnated with an atmosphere of reserve and security; and as the lengthening days of June brought them to the crown of the year — so that the flower-barrows were piled high with larkspur and marigolds, roses and great bunches of white marguerites; and children played later than ever round the trees and doorsteps of Chelsea, and night, when it had fallen, was a warm cloak hung almost too closely over the earth — they made a habit of calling in to see Jennifer.

In the grey-walled room, with its long, red curtains, bright rugs, its subtle-shaded cushions and quiet furnishings, a few, or many, people would sit on divans and in chairs, or on the floor, idly following chance twists of conversations, or with a closer interest arguing a serious issue.

'I don't see what right anybody has got to refuse a chance to any individual...'

'What kind of a chance? You're woolly-headed, Susan...'

'... All out of proportion. Once the aristocrat is told he must fight for his amusements, he shrugs his shoulders and finds less expensive ones. That's what the Socialist doesn't realize. *He* would have a revolution so that he and his wife could eat caviar too. But the millionaire doesn't think all that much of caviar. He'd make tripe fashionable...'

'I say, there's going to be a storm. Who'll come out for a walk, until the rain starts? Oh, what fun! *Look* at that thunder-cloud...'

'... Nonsense, Oliver. Education...'

'Education, my hat. If you want your Utopia, Susan, endow a school for surgeons to discover a way of enlarging the human brain-pan. And then stick a bowler hat on it, and a pen behind its ear, and give it a villa in Ealing — that's the nearest you'll get to perfection...'

Sometimes — but not very often — Alix would wander in upon them; and then the discussion would always stop, abruptly, and change its character; quickly becoming personal or topical, leaving theories and Utopias behind.

'Some awfully interesting people, Jennifer, watching Ralph paint this afternoon. Isn't it wonderful to be so unself-conscious? Hilary Bone is one of them, Susan. Do you remember that frightfully thrilling detective story he wrote, that Andrew read out aloud to us years ago in the barn at Hissop's? I told him about that. He was *so* flattered. And Midget Delaney, who acts in a funny little theatre in Covent Garden, and always plays children, because she's so tiny...'

She would exert her charm very skilfully, so that while she was there almost every one of them would be won by her, delighted with the flattery of her attention, with her beauty, and liveliness and condescension. But Susan, listening, would be aware of criticism. Alix used not to talk so much: one of her charms had been her lazy quietude. And Oliver, too, was silent in front of her, and would rudely read, or drink, or talk to some one else in a whisper while she was there — or even go away altogether. Such behaviour drew her curiosity; but in Oliver she had come upon a lizard-like elusiveness equal to her own; and since she saw so little of him, and since nothing occurred to connect him in her mind with Susan, she gave him up as an oddity, and returned to less difficult conquests.

So June slipped into July, and so Susan might have continued to play her game of hide-and-seek with love, if circumstances had not so arranged themselves that she was forced into a situation from which she could no longer run away. Steam was up in the merry-go-round; the tune was ground out faster and faster. Now the painted horses were flying round at a great pace, whirling out over the heads of the onlookers. And now all the passengers must cling to the gilt poles, or be dizzily flung off.

'You thought it was going to be fun, didn't you?' screams the music. 'You thought you were very superior, perched up there, with a very fine view? So it is, so it is, and there's plenty of fun for you yet! But it's dangerous fun, so hang on, my dears; hang on...'

'Walk up for the merry-go-round!' says the showman down below, on the steps. 'Only twopence each, and a fine time for everybody! Wait till the music stops, and then get on...'

PART TWO

PART TWO

CHAPTER ONE

ANDREW BELL walked through a Sussex lane with a stick in his hand, a letter in his pocket, and an elusive flame in his heart, that flickered this way and that, tormenting him, puzzling him, making him a stranger to himself.

The stick was his father's, and he had chosen it for the sturdy mannish comfort it gave him. It was a blackthorn, the knob of it shiny, and the little spikes blunted and polished with the constant small traffic of the years. He smote the ground with it, and reassured himself by the sound of its steady, confident tapping.

The letter was from Susan. The troubling of his mind and heart had also to do with Susan, and the manner of it astonished him.

When he was a little boy, he had loved Alix, from the first day she followed her mother into his own mother's drawing-room — she in a spotted-muslin frock, and he a small pagan suddenly astonished into the worship of beauty. From that moment he had plumbed the depths of his own particular universe to despoil it for her adorning. He climbed brittle, snappy fir trees to break off for her the feathery tips of the branches; he fished with too small a net for newts and tadpoles, clinging to slippery banks, suffering punishment for green-slimed suits and torn breeches. He braved the terrifying threat of night to stalk glow-worms for her, and, with heart beating with a wild mingling of panic and triumph, closeted them in a jar to take to her on the morrow. When the lanes or the garden yielded to him any unusual treasure, his pride and care was to guard and deliver it for Alix.

And when he discovered that, however flatteringly she might listen to his narratives of adventure and accept the beloved and hard-won spoils, the newts were allowed to escape, the tadpoles died for lack of feeding, the glow-worms thrown aside as ugly and stupid grubs whose place was lower than a snail or an earwig in Alix's hierarchy of Nature, he turned his disillusion inside out, and wore it as a hair shirt for his own affliction. He blamed himself for teasing her with inappropriate gifts. He schooled himself to like what she liked, find beauty where she found it. And when, astonished, she laughed at his solemn pains, finding his attempted likeness to her more comical than any frankly acknowledged difference, he wrapped that sorrow about him, too;

and tried another character. He attired himself in motley, and grew skilled in the part of the buffoon.

In this he was successful; Alix delighted in a court jester. Gravely he would tumble about for her, walking on his hands, playing one trick after another, and watching her out of the corner of his eye, like a performing dog, to see how the show pleased. When she grew to scorn such rough-and-tumble humour, he schooled his wits to the same purpose. For her sake he denied even his mother any real insight into his character; only with his father did he drop his adopted disguise, and become simply a rather more reserved boy than he might have been if all his romantic heart and imagination had not so soon put out leaves and the promise of flower. He became without knowing it a stumbling-block between his parents; since the mother, missing the love that, without Alix, Andrew would have offered to her, saw a closer friendliness between the boy and his father, and blamed them for a lack of charity, sooner than turn a clear gaze upon the truth.

When Mr. and Mrs. Pellerin were killed, Andrew knew his reward in a sudden dependence upon him that Alix showed; and, since she was so used to him and to his patience, and since in her secretive way she was fond of him, and possessive, she bound him more closely to her by letting him see more of her real grief than any one else ever knew. At that time Andrew became acquainted with the best side of Alix, and his imaginary picture of her took on a new humanity.

But, having yielded to him the utmost confidence of which she was capable, Alix found that she had no more to give him; and Andrew, still unconscious, had lost her before he had truly found her. They returned to the attitude of princess and court jester. Where Alix went, there Andrew followed; when she tormented him by showing to more amusing people a gaiety and a charm, a flirting allure and promise that died as soon as he was alone with her, he hid away his hurt, and, facing the real facts of their relationship in a blunt, self-tormenting way that was typical of his receptive and sensitive attitude towards most things, continued to give her the kind of tomfoolery that she liked. Such self-knowledge, and such resolution, hurried him out of childhood into a grave adolescence, which made all the better a background for his habitual pose of bumble-puppy.

Now he grew more understanding, and more attentive, towards his mother; more mature a companion for his father. Everybody roundabout liked him; everywhere he was spoken of as a model son, a perfect guest. Simple-minded and romantic-hearted girls tried to interest him by competing in the same game of buffoonery; but, though he played so hard at it himself, he was quite uninterested in the game and in them.

But now, as he walked along in a kind of dream that seemed to have set new lamps in his eyes with which to see the world, so that the wild roses in the hedge, the preoccupied and busy clouds, rabbits jumping across his path, and the thousand hums and squeaks and sudden darts and airy dashes of insects, were made clear to him in a startling manner, he was experiencing a new emotion. Now he could not deliberately lose himself in love; by the simple visioning of the beloved, he could not longer lose all sense in indulgent reverie. Imagination and feeling alike were escaped from control; and, like two wild and heady colts, went plunging into new and flower-starred meadows. The months of separation, and her own neglect, had released him from the blind bondage of habit which had throned Alix as the goddess of his devotion; he was awaking to find himself in love with Susan. Her letters, with their revealing of thoughts and errant fancies that he recognized as inhabitants of the country of his own mind also, had been no more than kindly narratives, for his sake, of the doings of

Alix. But to him they had been pages torn from a book which, written in a strange tongue, he had suddenly begun to comprehend.

The discovery was startling to him; he tried to shake it off, deny it, surprise it in hypocrisy. But he was not hypocritical, and knew well enough the state of his own mind.

'I must go up and find her,' he said, aloud, brandishing the blackthorn stick; and a startled cow, wondering, since it was nowhere near milking-time, why this curious individual had broken into his steady walk along the footpath to gesticulate and shout at her, shambled off into a remoter part of the pasture.

Andrew wrote to Jennifer, not to Susan; and went straight to the house in Church Street.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked, smiling at him as he bowed over her hand. 'You look as if you were sleep-walking. Cigarette?'

Andrew shook his head, and brushed off the frivolous interruption.

'I'm in love with Susan,' he said, as if he might have been announcing: 'I've stolen a diamond ring. Where shall I put it?'

Jennifer was astounded, both at the revelation and the change in Andrew, that he should have made it. In all the years of his devotion to Alix, he had never spoken of it, never permitted even a suggestion that it might be so.

She grew quite serious.

'My dear,' she told him at once, 'Susan is in love, too — but with somebody else.'

Andrew had not been prepared for this disaster; he had not thought of it. But he was by nature armed against catastrophe with a simple philosophy.

'Oh, then I'll go back. But you might let me know if she wants anything, or if I could be useful?'

'Pull yourself together, Andrew. You're surely not going to make the mistake with Susan that you made with Alix?'

'What do you mean?' He was surprised. He had been immediately prepared to make his way to Victoria, and start upon the journey back to Sussex.

'Go and see her. It will hurt you, but you'd far better be hurt than go on waiting for the Lord to pull the strings for you. My dear Andrew, I haven't even said that she's suitably in love, or that her love is returned, or that you couldn't run in and carry her off. Are you never going to take things into your own hands?'

'What am I to do?'

They talked for some time. Andrew seemed more alert than he had ever been, but waiting for instructions; a man come into a strange land, and not quite able to understand its customs or requirements.

'I'll go and see her now,' he said at last. He sat a moment or two longer, arms resting on knees, staring at the floor. 'I'm very grateful to you, Jennifer. You see people very clearly, don't you? And you don't stuff one up with a lot of sentimental optimism.'

'My dear, Susan in love is a transparent person; and, as I've told you, she may be right. She may have attracted the proper and suitable lover. But you've had a long schooling in watching and waiting. If you really love her, you may as well make use of it. Go and see what you think of it yourself.'

Andrew left her; she watched him from between the long red curtains, and then went back to her piano, where she spun her thoughts into a melody, which had curious little erratic twists and surprises, sudden changes of key and of mood, and ended abruptly with a chord that hung upon the astonished and trembling air. She had all her life found her greatest interest in the lives and characters of other people; and had taken a considerable part in the management of them. But she had not before found her affections so surprisingly entangled; and though Susan was outside the small secret circle of her intimate life, the child had come very near to it; and Jennifer was troubled.

The two sisters had been quarrelling when Andrew arrived, and, though the conflict had been smoothed over, and the immediate cause of it already forgotten, each found relief in the arrival of a guest.

'Andrew! *What* a nice surprise! Come and sit here. Why didn't you tell me?'

'My beautiful Alix, every time I've suggested coming to see you for the last three months you've put me off. I'm here incognito. I'm Mr. Blanco Blush. Mr. Bell asked me to call upon the two Miss Pellerins on my way through London. I presume I *am* speaking to Miss Alix? And this is Miss Susan?'

Susan chuckled, bowed with exaggerated politeness, and adopted a simpering manner.

'Oh, dear, you quite overwhelm us. And how is dear Mr. Bell?'

'Oh, very sadly, very sadly. Here, you know.' He tapped his forehead. 'Very tragic. But we don't mention it. Oh, no. Not even among ourselves. *So* bright he tries to be; but for such as he it's a sad world, Miss Susan; a terrible world.'

'Getting on nicely with the handicrafts he was doing?'

Andrew guffawed. The carpentering classes he had joined was an old joke.

'Quite nicely. Oh, that was a splendid idea for him. Quite splendid. But it palls, you know. Like everything else, it palls.'

Alix was looking from one to the other in bewilderment. 'What are you two idiots talking about? Have you had lunch, Andrew? You *are* a lunatic. Won't you ever grow up?'

'Lunch? Oh, yes, thank you.' Andrew could not remember whether it was morning or afternoon, lunch-time or dinner-time. The change in Susan was so apparent, and bore out so clearly what Jennifer had told him. There was a new grace in her manner, an ease of speech and of gesture; a new light and confidence about her. 'What I *would* like is a rock bun. Does Penny still make rock buns? Can I go and see Penny?'

In the kitchen were more welcomes, more nonsense and laughter. Alix stood upon the edge of the merriment; now and again trying to draw Andrew into the old intimacy. Every time he eluded her.

'Penny! My old love! How I've missed you! Why haven't you written to me, Penny?' He scowled, seized her by the arm, stared into her delighted, laughing face, patted her wrinkled hand. 'Not flirting with these gay London lads? Have you saved me a rock bun, Penny?'

He filled his mouth with the new-baked confection, which Penny was, most fortunately, making that day. He packed the little cakes into his pockets while Penny tried to keep them, with grease-proof paper, from harming the tweed.

'Oh, Master Andrew, you'll be in such a pickle! Whatever will I say to the mistress?' She was back again in her childhood, and scarcely noticed the look that passed between the sisters. They all made a fuss of her, and left her shaking her head over old memories. For the rest of the time Andrew was with them they kept up the same atmosphere of nonsense, he and Susan; and Alix was compelled, to join in the conversation at all, to adapt herself to it. When he had gone, promising to write, to wireless a message when he got home, to do all manner of ridiculous things, Alix busied herself about small occupations with a change of manner that disquieted Susan. And little remarks began to drop quietly from her lips, in each of them a poison.

'You'll have to be a little more careful, Susan.' She was turning out a drawer, stacking the letters and oddments in small piles on her lap, on the floor, on the top of the bureau. 'People will begin to think you're a little foolish about men. You seem to have changed entirely.' A string was loosened too suddenly; letters were scattered in a rush upon the carpet. Alix picked them up one by one. 'It isn't as if you just flirted. You — rather give yourself away, you know, darling.'

'What do you mean?'

'You giggle and — almost ogle them, Susan. I know you've always been very quiet. The change has been a much bigger one for you than it has for me. But — first Jeremy Small, and then that curious young Oliver Rand, now Andrew. I think we owe it to — our parents — not to make fools of ourselves...'

Susan jumped up in anger; but when speech broke from her the words were torn not from anger, but from misery. Alix put down the letters, held out her arms, made a great show of compassion.

'You make me out a monster — insane — I'm not — I don't ogle ——'

'Darling! Don't get so upset. My dear Susie, you mustn't take things so seriously. Hush, now, quietly. There. I was only warning you. Don't take it so to heart. My darling, I didn't think it would upset you so.'

Having pointed and delivered her barb, Alix was free of her mischievous intent, and her whole personality was bent upon soothing Susan with her charm. And Susan, whose first impulse had been one of fury — so that she would have liked to beat the calumny from her, strike Alix who had uttered it, and leave her sister and the house behind her — found herself instead in Alix's arms.

'It isn't true, Alix. It isn't true...'

'No, Baby, I'm sorry. Of course it isn't true — not in the way you took it. You must just be careful, darling. Don't be so impulsive...'

Susan would have taken the thrust more lightly if she had not herself felt something in Andrew's manner that confirmed it; he had seemed — when she turned to him suddenly — to look at her in the way Oliver looked at her; with a dark brooding, an intense concentration, that was instantly shaken off; so that the moment after she laughed at herself for imagining it. But Alix's accusation woke the memory of those moments, and gave her a feeling of guilt. When Alix had soothed her, and left her — to change for dinner, for it was the Fourth of July, and she was going with some American friends of Ralph Truscott's to a 'celebrating party' — the melancholy which had not visited her for so long came down again like a cloud upon her. After Alix had left the house, Susan wandered about from room to room, trying to find consolation in the rooms themselves, in the charming grouping of the furniture — chairs confidentially drawn up towards tables, or idly looking out of the window; curtains left askew, as if some one might have been standing there, and only for a moment disappeared. She had a curious sense that there was some one there besides herself. But she could make no acquaintance with this elusive spirit; and loneliness, suddenly afflicting her, drove her up to see if Amorel might be in, and inclined for conversation.

Amorel was putting mascara on her eyelashes with a blunt little brush.

'Hullo, dear,' she said, half-turning round — a comical stiff gesture, showing one eye fully made up, the other looking oddly naked — 'are you coming to Simeon and Maxine's?'

'No. I hadn't been asked. Are you?'

'Nobody's been asked. It isn't a party. But it's the Fourth, you know, and ever since they came to London we've told them that we'd show them how really nice English people can be by paying them a visit on the Fourth. Isn't Oliver going?'

'Yes. I remember now. He asked me to go, too. But I felt like being alone.'

'*How* foolish! Change your mind. Be an angel and give me that towel.'

Susan gave her the towel.

'Would it matter if I did come, too?'

'Of course not.' Amorel put the towel down again, turned round, and looked at Susan. 'You're pale, my dear. Got a headache? Go and put some powder on your nose, and come along with me. We'll pick up Oliver. Ten minutes...'

In less than ten minutes Susan was ready: and by the time they had reached Oliver's cottage, her depression had changed to a light-headed excitement. His mood fitted with her own. He pulled her hair, teased her, flattered her, wooed her with his impudent manner.

'Changed your mind, flibbertigibbet? It never did know its mind for five minutes, did it?'

There were perhaps twenty people in the two big rooms that opened out of one another, and had windows looking one way onto an Italian garden, and the other way onto a Chelsea square. Seeing them, Susan realized that it had been a hot and wearying day, and that she herself was worn with many moods. For everybody seemed tired. Most of them would have been happier in bed, if they had not, through a habit as conventional as the habit of drawing curtains at night, or locking doors and windows, come to regard companionship as a remedy for all ills.

Viola was too tired to shimmy; Maxine too conscious of being the hostess to give full play to her ukulele. Instead, every one drank rather more, and in greater variety, than usual; and conversation grew general — not an interesting conversation to Susan, who was accustomed now to the sharp, quick-witted controversy of Oliver and Jennifer and Jane in argumentative mood; but, distributed among the diverse people in the room, it flickered about one topic and another, amusingly.

'... Do you *really* think everybody's life is mapped out for them? I mean, it's already decided what I'll be doing in five years' time? Oh, I say ——'

'I'm sure it is. Not only in five years' time, but every minute. Whether you're going to pick up that handkerchief, or have some one else pick it up for you...'

'... People who can do crystal-gazing. Marvellous. My brother and I once...'

'Or even gipsies. They're *too* exciting. Once I went with Jeremy — do you remember? Oh, he isn't here — to Barnet Fair. And a gipsy told my fortune. My dear, she told me everything that had ever happened to me. About having scarlet fever when I was ten, and my father being sent out to Nigeria...'

'If you really want your fortunes told, you'd better ask Lisa.' Oliver spoke into the middle of the conversation, looking with a mocking grimace across the room to a girl who was sitting silent there, listening with an expression of half-scornful, half-indulgent interest. Susan did not remember having seen her before. But she gave Oliver a calm annoyed look, without any emphasis of annoyance, rather as if she would have expected him to say some such thing.

'Nobody wants a fortune told. Shut up, Noll.'

But people were speaking eagerly all round her.

'*Really* tell fortunes? Oh, what fun! With a tea-cup, or hands, or what?'

'*Do*, Miss Gray...'

'Lisa, you're in for it now.'

'Will you tell mine?'

'Oh, she must do me, mustn't she, Bill?'

Oliver walked over to Maxine, who was talking in another part of the room. 'Lisa's going to tell fortunes,' he said. 'Where are the cards?'

Maxine broke off her conversation; she and the man she was talking to came across to the group round Lisa. 'Here they are' — she held a pack in her hand — 'but I thought you weren't going to do them any more?'

'Oh, well, it's rather stupid. But it doesn't much matter.'

They started again, urging her on, competing for her interest.

'Gwen, have yours told. Lisa, will you do Gwen's?'

'No, thank you, really. I don't like having my fortune told.'

'I say, how many could you do?'

'I really don't mind,' said Lisa indifferently. She made a fan of the cards, closed them up again, looked round the crowding, eager faces. 'I'll start with you, if you like.' And she pointed the pack in the direction of a girl who had stood silent; a sullen, dark girl, whose name was Betty Gronter, who had been brought there by some one else, and whom no one knew very well.

Interest died down a little, since no one intimate with the majority was going to be revealed and prophesied about. But, as Lisa made the girl cut, and then spread the cards out, and settled down to a study of them, the atmosphere grew expectant again. For the moment Miss Gronter was one of them.

'You are very jealous,' — the voice broke the silence so quietly that it was quite impersonal; as if a spirit might have entered and silently taken the place of the fortune-teller, — 'of a fair-haired woman. She is going to bring you a good deal of trouble, so your jealousy, I suppose, is justified. Anyway, your life is to be altered, considerably, through her. You are going to make some kind of a removal — either from, or into, a very large building. Perhaps it's a big block of flats. There is to be scandal talked about you; but you will not mind very much, and it will die down. Happiness will come for you rather unexpectedly; through some one who will call to see you, and who will bring you news of a fire. Now will you cut again?'

Three times the cards were read for the one fortune. People looked curiously at Miss Gronter. How much of this was true — would come true? When it was over, they waited for her to speak, half-expecting her to be changed by the revelation, so that she would make some unexpected utterance. Having heard so much, whether it were true or not, they would have liked her to become sociable, so that their knowledge would not embarrass them. But she only smiled, without either humour or pleasure, and thanked Lisa abruptly; neither moving away nor accepting the friendliness of the circle, since, after all, she had not asked to be singled out from among them.

Lisa told Maxine's fortune with the same dispassionate calmness; but no one credited her with it, for they knew the two to be intimate, and believed that Lisa was using knowledge not obtained from the cards. One or two left the group, and started the gramophone again. But for nearly an hour Lisa was kept busy in her corner, and Susan and Amorel, who were interested, stayed all the time to look on. Presently Oliver joined them, standing with his arm about Susan's shoulders. After a time Viola, out of curiosity, nodded when Lisa raised questioning eyebrows; and once again the cards were shuffled.

It was a comical future that seemed to spread out before Viola. Oliver rocked with laughter, teasing her, until Lisa herself turned round, in annoyance, and asked him to be quiet. But domesticity for Viola seemed a strange vocation, and she laughed aloud at some of the prophecies.

'To the surprise of your friends, you will have a love-affair with a fair-haired man, and you may even marry him. Yes, you probably will; for there's the ring. You will receive a letter within the next few days which will be the cause of your leaving London for the country, where you will find a certain amount of money — contentment — and a very hopeful future. So you needn't worry, my dear.'

'Good Lord, you have let me in for something! Will you tell the cards again after I'm married, and let me know when the divorce will be? You *are* a useful sort of person to have about the house!' Viola, delighted, looked round for a new victim, and seized Susan's hand, pulling her forward. 'Come on, Susan, you're standing at the back like the Sphinx, and having all the fun without doing anything for it. Lisa, you've got to tell

Susan's fortune. Why should she be let off? She's been laughing at me...'

Susan was torn between disbelief, wanting to hear Lisa's cool voice take charge of her future, and fear of what it might hold. But she cut with a laugh, and with interest watched the sequence of the cards.

Oliver looked uneasy, changed his weight from one foot to the other, started to whistle, stopped, and turned his back on the group. But when Lisa began to speak — after a long deliberate pause, whose purpose they could not fathom — he was watching her closely; and so was the whole of the circle in that corner of the room. Somehow their silence, and a rumour that this was the last time Lisa would read the cards, attracted others. The group was larger than it had been since the beginning.

'You are going to have a time — a short time — of happiness. Of extraordinary happiness — it's a remarkable collection of cards.' She pointed them out — a flaming sun, a heart, a key. 'Your happiness will concern what are known as affairs of the heart; and you are evidently going to get some of what you want, at any rate.

'Then — things don't look so promising. There's some sort of separation. I can't tell you what. After that you will be disturbed by jealousy of a dark woman.' Lisa's expression changed. She was silent for what seemed an extraordinarily long time. Then, very quickly, she picked up the cards and shook them together. 'There's a departure, and tears, and malice, and an offer of hospitality. And that's all there is to that.' She made no suggestion of finishing the fortune, as she had the others. Yet they all waited for something else to happen.

Then:

'As a matter of fact, there's one card missing from this pack,' she said. 'There isn't a Faithful Friend. He must have got lost. And, of course, he makes a difference sometimes.'

But Susan was sitting in a daze of bewilderment and foreboding; the adventure, undertaken lightly, had become, as such adventures may, suddenly momentous. Oliver was staring at her from the other side of the group, his hands in his pockets. It was a great effort for her to say — 'Thank you,' and laugh at the prophecy, with Lisa.

'I expect, you know, it's the Faithful Friend who does the trick every time,' she said. But she looked across at Oliver in a panic, and in that instant knew her love, and his, as if each had made loud proclamation.

The events of the evening were not yet over, although a great many people thought they were, and already Maxine was being sought out by one guest after another who wished to thank her, and share a last joke with her, and wish her good-night. Susan and Oliver found themselves dancing together, each of them aware that they had marched another step forward into the territory that waited their discovery. When they stopped, and Oliver left her to turn off the gramophone, only very few were left. Simeon and Maxine, Lisa, red-headed Cherry, and a man whom Susan knew to be a friend of the Carlows, called George, were gathered round the hearth, in which a great jar of marguerites stood, drooping a little in the closeness of the room.

Maxine called: 'Listen, you two, we've had a real idea. We're all going down to Stapley. How long would it take you to pack a suitcase?'

'She needn't bother with a suitcase. We could fit her up with clothes. There are plenty of yours down there.'

'Stapley?' Susan was bewildered.

'Our house on the river.'

Oliver more quickly realized the plan. They all talked at once. The thought of the cool and quiet of a country-house was already clearing their heads of some of the heat and confusion of the evening. Susan did not know what to answer. The idea of so sudden a plan alarmed her. She was used to the deliberate and important planning of journeys.

But the others swept her into their mood.

'There's a string of taxis on their way to the door,' said Simeon, coming away from the telephone. 'We'll pick you all up in turn, starting in about half an hour. Or could any one else muster a car?'

Oliver's car — the ridiculous, battered vehicle, in which he made undignified and dangerous dashes through the London traffic — was in a garage near Cheyne Row. The Carlows' could be brought round in a minute. They all scattered; and as the door was opened, the adventure grew more tempting with the promise of refreshment in the cool inrushing air.

Susan, afraid to switch on the lights for fear of waking the household, stumbled into Alix's darkened room, and found her sister in bed. She explained, in whispers, the Carlows' plan, half-expecting Alix to be amazed and angry at such a wild suggestion.

Alix was angry at being disturbed, not at Susan's proposal.

'Well, you needn't wake everybody up,' she said, turning away from Susan towards the wall.

'You'll let me know, I suppose, when you are coming back?'

'Of course. Will you be all right, Alix? Are you sure you don't mind?'

'I shall probably be going away for a few days myself, later on.'

When Susan had packed a suitcase, hurrying with excitement rather than any need to hurry, and had come back to the foot of the bed, Alix was asleep. The room felt stuffy. Susan opened a window, and pulled back the curtain. The light of a street-lamp, by painting a flat yellow pattern of window-panes on the far wall, threw the rest of the room into a deeper shadow. Alix's face and pillows were a pale blur. Susan turned the face of the clock so that her sister would see it when she woke, whispered 'Good-night,' and walked quietly out of the house.

She waited by the river for one of the cars to pick her up, with a hope that it would be Oliver's, but prepared for Fate to play a trick on her. She leaned upon the parapet, and, looking down, saw close below her the huddled white shapes of the swans, who, travellers from distant reaches of the Thames, voyaged here at night to take advantage of the shelter of the bridge. Their webbed feet, as they continually stirred the water, made a gentle patter like the noise of rain. It was a soothing and kindly sound, removing further off the loneliness of the night.

In less than five minutes Oliver had drawn up beside her.

'I came for you first because I wanted you to sit here,' he said, putting a rug across her knees. 'But I was supposed to start with Cherry. We'll have to dash back. Then there's George.' He started the car, swung it round, changed gear, and so gathered speed; then he turned towards Susan, and put his hand in hers. For the first time they looked clearly at one another, and Susan was visited with an exaltation of joy. Oliver's teasing and ungentle manner had dropped from him completely.

'You know now? You understand? There isn't any need to talk about it?'

Susan shook her head. She pulled off her hat, and the swift air swept through her hair and beat exhilaratingly upon her face. The night was starred with points of light — in the heavens, in the many-windowed houses, in the strung chains of street-lamps, and on the invisible craft of the river. They turned up from the river and stopped at a house in a crescent. Oliver made a signalling noise with the horn; a window at the top was flung open, and Cherry looked out; she waved, and called something they could not hear. In the moment or two before she joined them, Oliver and Susan communed together, each searching out the separate identity of the other. Then Cherry darted out across the pavement, and got into the seat at the back.

'Max and Simeon are taking George.'

'There's nobody else, then?'

'I don't know who's going. Was there anybody else?'

Oliver paused a moment. Then:

'Oh, well, Max will look after them. Warm enough?'

'Yes, rather. Fire away!'

They made their way in and out of the streets of London, halting in the traffic beside fruit-stalls bright under their arc lights, butchers' shops with their pink and hideous display, policemen whose human faces seemed inhumanly buttoned up in the little space between uniform, helmet, and coat. Then they turned to the right almost at once, and were free of the busy streets.

For an hour and a half they drove through the night. Nothing else seemed to be going out of London; the road was clear for them — a strange road, hardly lit up by the headlights of cars that rushed towards them with a roar and vanished in the forgotten darkness behind. When they turned off the main road, along a lane whose hedges crowded closely upon their own lights, there was no sound but the high purring of the old-fashioned engine. Oliver pulled round without warning between two high iron gates, and up a drive whose gravel was turned aside by the wheels of the car with a noise like the breaking of a wave.

The silhouette of the house showed yellow lights for open door and windows. They found the rest of the party — the sound of their voices directed them — eating bacon and eggs in the kitchen, each of them cooking his own supper.

Within a quarter of an hour they had all been shown by Maxine or Simeon to their bedrooms. Susan undressed in front of a cheval-glass that oddly revealed her to herself, so that she felt a stranger to her reflection. Then she got into a wide, white bed, neatly prepared for her, switched off the light, and, after staring for a while into the unfamiliar darkness, there she slept.

CHAPTER TWO

A PRINT-FROCKED servant, a country girl, with black eyes, and a fine brown skin, woke Susan the next morning by taking her a cup of strong but delicate-flavoured tea.

The prevailing whiteness of the room quickly struck through the haze of sleep, and Susan was soon awake. She looked round at the pink-and-white chintz cover that had been taken off the bed the night before and lay neatly folded on a chair that showed the same pattern. Plain white linen curtains, now drawn back, framed so charming a garden that Susan could have laughed aloud and clapped her hands, so like was this room — as she suddenly realized — to a carefully prepared stage-set. She could even see the tall heads of lupins, not yet quite in flower, and a bed of peonies in full, promising bud.

Then she studied her own person, amusedly, with great interest, feeling the texture of her skin and the shape of her arms, exerting the muscles of her legs, stretching to her full length in bed. Then a great exuberance of joy held her still and excited; then, more soberly, she relaxed and again looked about her.

The cheval-glass that had seemed so large and strange the night before had shrunk now to its more ordinary proportions, and neatly returned to Susan's gaze the end of the bed she was lying in, and her clothes as she had thrown them down on a rush-bottomed chair. In the trees, whose outermost branches intruded upon the window like a back-cloth, the voices of thrushes and blackbirds, and a thousand more indiscriminate cheeps and chirps, betrayed a host of hidden occupants.

Susan was very content to lie and think; she had no wish to hurry out of bed. The neat perfection of her surroundings made the events of the night before seem not only less real, but part of a conspiracy amongst all of them gathered — as she supposed they all were, unless she had indeed dreamed a dream and been spirited out of her ordinary existence — under this roof, which she knew she would find as perfectly thatched as in any musical comedy. This sudden removal from Alix and all the associations of her life had the effect of making her feel a different person; quick to influences and moods that before had passed her by, and ready with a confident delight to play whatever rôle might be cast for her in this amusing play.

Even Oliver, remembered, was no more real than the rest of them: the thin-spun web of delight which last night had seemed to be swinging them together out into the universe among the stars seemed instead to have set them down in a pasteboard Arcady. Susan moved her head so that she could see the pictures on the walls. They were photographs of handsome young women — three of the same person — in arrogant, attractive poses, as deliberate and successful as the room. Above her head was an inadequate but suitable etching of a three-masted schooner in full sail.

As she pondered these things, light-hearted and content, the door opened boldly, and Maxine, in a brilliant red silk dressing-gown cut like a man's, walked into the room.

'Good-morning,' she said in her deep, vigorous voice. 'Slept all right?'

'Marvellously. What a wonderful view I've got!'

'Quite nice, isn't it? We have had the peony-bed made only this year. They haven't done badly. What do you like for breakfast?'

'Oh, I hardly ever eat much breakfast. Do sit down for a minute or two. You drove down, didn't you? You must be tired.'

Maxine settled on the edge of the bed, clasping her hands round her knees so that her square-toed mules found a resting-place on Susan's dressing-gown, which was lying half on and half off the bed.

'Lord, no, I'm not tired this morning. Probably go off sound asleep this afternoon. You don't look as though you were dancing half the night. How do you manage this fresh-as-a-daisy business?'

Susan laughed and did not answer, meeting instead the extraordinary bright and youthful eyes of Maxine.

'Oliver brought you down? I was so sleepy last night I hardly knew who arrived and who didn't.'

The casual question brought back with a rush the atmosphere of that bewildering adventurous ride.

'Yes, Oliver brought me down. Do you know who your guests are, if you were so vague about them?'

'Roughly, yes.' Maxine laughed now. 'There will probably be some more at the week-end. I must go. Everybody will be clamouring for the bath, and I like to get my tub over. That's a nice hospitable thing to say, isn't it? You've got a little bathroom of your own in there, you know. Found it? Through here.' She jerked her head towards one of the white-painted panels of the wall. 'Turn the crystal knob.' She got up to show Susan how to move the hidden door. She waited a moment more, looking at self-forgetful Susan, who, in her thin, flowered nightdress, stood regarding with a smile the luxury of the concealed bathroom. Then: 'See you later,' she said abruptly, and was gone.

The tiny doll's-house bath was fitted with every imaginable device; Susan spent a long time in it. By the time she was dressed, the sun was high and a couple of romping dogs were gambolling over the lawn. She discovered that the windows opened on to a verandah and that a flight of white-painted wooden steps led from the verandah to the garden. She went out.

The garden on one side stretched away into a pleasant mingling of trees and flower-beds; on the other it sloped down to come to an abrupt end in a rockery; and here Susan found the river, or, more properly, a little creek, which twisted round in a circular stream and joined the river itself, perhaps a mile away. Susan had forgotten that they had called this a riverside house; she was very happy to see it, and stood idly on the bank, leaning against an elm tree, watching the tiny flotsam and jetsam evading or struggling with the snags in the shallow bed. Then a gong, reverberating through the sunlit air, brought back to her mind that this was breakfast-time.

Simeon, serving haddock from a huge dish, greeted her boisterously.

'I didn't think *you'd* be a lie-abed! What will you have to eat?'

'She wasn't a lie-abed,' said George, extending his long arm over the table to pass her the toast. 'I saw her in the garden, communing with Nature.' He had a pleasant voice and an attractive, quiet smile, and Susan, who had not noticed him much before, started wondering about him, for he was a curious mixture, from the big onyx ring he wore to his flame-coloured tie, and the long, rather heavy, sculptured face above it.

'I was discovering the river,' she said, and took the plate that Simeon held out to her, heaped with eggs and bacon.

Simeon, who was a happy host, took a considerable amount of exercise in the vigorous looking-after his guests needed. Maxine read them extracts from the 'Daily Mail.' Cherry, bright and impertinent, like a spoilt kitten, ate busily and made small, sharp comments on the day's news.

'Betty to the fore again. I can see her name on the page facing me, Max. What's she doing now? Oh, only a burglary! How mild for Betty! What's that? Drowned bathing? What idiots people are...'

All this, Susan knew, was a prelude to the arrival of Oliver. The curtain was up, and they were all disporting themselves nicely. But in a moment — any moment — a door would open onto the stage and he would come in, and the play would begin in earnest...

When he did come in, he sent one quick, immediate look at her; a look that made Cherry raise her eyebrows and sent Susan herself into a tumult. He scarcely spoke; shaking his head at Simeon's hospitable offers, he buttered a piece of toast, spread marmalade upon it, and went to lie sprawling on a window-seat, making an isolated remark to Simeon about the swimming-pool he was building — a remark that stood out of his abstraction in such a way that silence fell upon the room.

Nobody spoke any more until Lisa, who had eaten very little breakfast, and looked as if she had not slept, her eyes dark-ringed in a white face, got up and said: 'I think I'm going to be lazy. Do you mind, Max, if I bury myself here for the morning with a book?'

'Do exactly as you like. That's what we're all going to do. Anybody else got any plans? I suppose no one has a burning desire to see the sights of the county, or anything?'

Simeon suggested that Susan might like to accompany him into Henley to buy the supplies of gramophone records, fruit, whiskey — which seemed to have got low; a discovery which gave Maxine the opportunity of saying, 'That's your precious Bob again, Simeon: I told you he was a bum house-boy!' — and all the other things that were apparently a necessity, whether one were in London or Timbuctoo. But Maxine at once told him that Susan was not to be appropriated, so he drove off by himself, consoled by the magnificent appearance of the new Issotta, which responded so satisfactorily to his touch upon the wheel.

Then Cherry, who had hoped that Simeon would ask her instead of Susan, declared that nothing could be more delightful than a game of tennis. Since the court had not been played on that year, and the net and posts were still in a shed at the bottom of the garden, and the lawn-marker, broken last summer, had — unfortunately for the unpopular Bob — never been mended, it was an unfortunate suggestion. But George had offered himself as an opponent before either of them had known of the difficulties, and would not now withdraw. So he and Cherry walked out through the long French windows together; and Susan was reminded of her notion of the morning, that they had all been transported into the second act of a musical comedy — so sophisticated were they in their appearance and requirements; George in his immaculate clothes, and Cherry and Maxine with scarlet lips, rouged cheeks, and darkened eyes and lashes.

Maxine turned to her as abruptly as if she had been aware of her thoughts.

'What would you like to do? Tired? Like a book?'

Susan was overcome with panic. She felt that there was nothing in this house that she wanted to do: if this were a stage, then she had no business on it. In this revulsion of feeling there was nothing she would have liked so much as to turn from them and run out of the house — back, not to Chelsea, but to Sussex. The thought of Andrew was a lighthouse in a strange and terrifying sea. Then, ashamed of her discourtesy, she pulled herself back from this chasm widening at her feet and tried to make answer. But Oliver was before her.

'I'll take Susan round the creek and show her all the back-door scandals.'

Maxine, seeing the girl's flushed cheeks, mistook the cause of them.

'Right,' she said; 'off with you. The canoe's in the boathouse. You'd better take some extra cushions.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Investigate the kitchen.'

Oliver pulled Susan round by the hair, and Susan, feeling the tears spring to her eyes, did not know whether they came from angry hurt or from melancholy.

'Sometimes you're *maddening*, Oliver,' she said to him in a fury. And then, with a great wish to escape, 'I'll race you to the river...'

Oliver, taken by surprise and too lazy to hurry, leaped with great strides over flower-beds and rockery and reached the landing-stage one second after her. And Susan, for the first time in her life, was kissed.

Yet, contrary to all her expectations, the experience bewildered rather than delighted her, and she found a deeper magic in love-making when Oliver — who was a skilful instructor — had taught her more adequately to respond.

And Andrew, in a Sussex garden prettily set about with ornamental flowers and grasses, and a sunk pool, and a fountain, was circumventing the efforts of a golden-headed maiden to lure him into intimacy.

'Sometimes one feels *starved*, don't you think, for something really *interesting* to do? You're interested in reading, aren't you, too? It does make one *think*...'

'Thinking,' said Andrew, gently directing with a snapped stick the path of a spider away from the edge of the pond, 'is beyond me. No grey matter. Do you like aquariums?'

'Oh, rather. Have you got one? How fascinating!'

'Thank God!' said Andrew to himself; and then, aloud: 'My father has rather a fine one. He'd love some one to show it to...'

Maxine was not very interested in looking after her husband's house. She liked the look of the store cupboards, and the brightly coloured bottles of soup, tins of fruit, jam-jars, pots of marmalade, packets of candles, and the thousand and one other provisions that gave her so gay a welcome when she opened the cupboard doors. But all the ordering was left to Mrs. Dimmock, her housekeeper and the mother of Clara, the girl who had brought Susan her early-morning tea; and she, and her husband and son as gardeners, and the doubtful Bob as an odd-job man, and a little kitchen-maid who came over on her bicycle from the nearest village whenever there were people staying at Stapley, were all the staff.

So Maxine's domestic duties did not occupy her for very long, and were really finished when she had ordered the meals for the day. She stayed a little while — for she liked Mrs. Dimmock — asking about the family, and the live-stock they kept in their lodge garden, which supplied the house with excellent fowls, ducks, eggs and butter, cabbages, cauliflowers, and other vegetables in their season. She learned that a retriever puppy which she had given the boy, Giles, was growing into a fine watchdog; that the pet duck had gone lame; and that this looked to be a fine year for apples. Then she left the Dimmock family to the enjoyment of the brown pot of tea that had been standing all this time on the kitchen hob, and spent the rest of the morning sorting out clothes and a variety of personal belongings that had collected here during months of casual visits, and which gave her entertainment by the reminiscences they aroused and the purposes they suggested for the future.

Once she went into the lounge, to find Lisa fast asleep, a blue-bound book slipped from her knee to the floor, her face waxen and exhausted as it rested, so very still, on a yellow cushion.

The return of Simeon — a noisy return, accompanied by a roaring of the engine that sounded like a trumpet-chorus by all the fiends of hell — woke Lisa, brought Maxine back from her reveries, and roused the kitchen to the quicker preparation of lunch. A few minutes later, George and Cherry came in from the garden; even George was flushed with exercise, and both of them were laughing.

'Oh, dear,' said Cherry, throwing a *béret* down upon a chair, 'we've had such fun. Tennis was too dull and I couldn't hit a ball, so we stole two bicycles, Maxine, and we've been tearing about all over the place.'

'Frightening all the old ladies of the neighbourhood. Your name hereafter in the village will be mud.'

Cherry went away to wash and to restore her dishevelled make-up. Lisa was already standing in front of the Queen Anne mirror in her bedroom, spreading a faint, delicate layer of rouge over her cheeks with a sponge. Maxine went into the dining-room and started to carve the cold chicken.

One by one they assembled round the table, and, just as Cherry would have voiced the thoughts of them all by asking, 'Where are the other two?' Susan and Oliver came in.

They walked slowly across the room. Susan turned to her place, a little smile on her lips, but Oliver caught her hand and pulled her round so that they faced the company, side by side.

'Behold!' he said, with a sweeping gesture of his free hand, 'offer up your congratulations. We are engaged!'

Oliver's words hung upon the air; every one noticed what a curious, heavy tick the clock had and how odd was the collection of china on the table — with a butter-dish of Crown Derby, and Rockingham bread-plates, and a variety of modern pottery. Then Simeon, in the voice of a man who wakes from too-vivid a dream, made the appropriate responses.

'What an honour for Stapley!' said Maxine, looking very kindly at Susan; 'we've never had an engagement here before. You're a dark horse, my dear. Carrying on like this under our noses.'

'Tell me' — George's voice was earnest — 'would you rather have a biscuit-barrel or a butter-dish? I'm terribly stereotyped over wedding-presents, but I'm rather a good hand at finding *the* butter-dish that everybody's wanting...'

Then: 'What a hustler you are!' cried Cherry. 'Give the poor dears a chance. Who said they were going to get married? Come, Oliver, you haven't given up all your wonderful ideas? I couldn't bear it if the apostle of free love turned back on us.'

'I should think,' said Lisa abruptly, 'it would be a very good thing if he did.' With this remark, delivered with a sarcastic humour, she leaned forward and chose a crisp and curling lettuce-leaf, dipped it in the salt, and nibbled it, delicately, the jewelled bangle on her wrist flashing with light as she moved.

Then the whole room drew a deep breath, as it were, and the day continued in an ordinary manner, with a lazy afternoon, in which Maxine, in her turn, slept, and Lisa, without a word to any one, played in a desultory way on the piano, and Oliver, frowning at the tunes she chose, turned his back on her and learned from Susan how to play cat's-cradle.

Susan's days now went by in a bright dream. Happiness so played about every small event that everything, from the moment of waking in the morning until sleep took her at night, was encompassed by it; and, though one day it rained and another day heavy clouds and a high wind played havoc with all their plans for amusement, she remembered each occasion as having been illumined with sunlight, and did not care that the brilliance sprang not from the heavens but from within.

With Oliver she explored the countryside; picnicked by the river; walked lightly through strange towns, made an acquaintance with shops here and there, a farm, cottages in one village and another, fields, streams, lanes, and trees, as if never before in her life had she come upon such things. She told Oliver of her life, and out of it he reconstructed the image of her as she must have been at this age or that, until she saw herself as he saw her, so that even forlorn unhappinesses of the past were caught up in her present joy. He told her of his own family; of his father, who was dead; of his mother and sister. But, though they talked of the past and the future, and though the passing of the days showed them to be still in the present, actually they were contained by no time, but were like happy ghosts exploring where they would without restriction, seeing what they wanted to see, finding what they meant to find, flinging their own colouring upon a world of their own creating. When Oliver, in a mood of depression, described to her his own life; the wild inconsequence which had made the gentle fetters of his home too irksome to bear; his careless experiments in love; his theories and arguments of which Cherry now made such mockery — Susan felt that he was telling her a tale she already knew; that there was no revelation he could make, no crime he could confess to, which would astonish or alarm her.

For almost a fortnight she did not write to Alix at all. Then an irritated note from her sister, addressed in the care of Maxine and forwarded from the Carlows' Chelsea house, awaited her one morning — a serene-looking, scented, pale mauve epistle lying calmly on the breakfast-table.

I think you might have let me know something about your movements [the letter began, without introduction]. Jennifer asks what I've done with you, Jeremy has been round twice to know when you are coming back, and I want to go away. Somebody will have to look after the house, and I think it's your turn. I seem to have done it ever since we came here. Do write and tell me whether you're being adopted by your rich friends, or when you're deigning to come home again.

Susan did not show this letter to Oliver, but she did in a roundabout way inform him of it, and it drew them into a discussion of the immediate future.

'I suppose we ought to tell your beautiful sister.' Oliver was lying on his back on the slope of a high, wood-crowned hill about ten miles from Stapley, with the sun beating down on him and his hat tilted forward to throw a shadow over his nose.

'Don't you want to?'

'Not particularly. Do you?'

'I don't particularly want to do anything, except go on happily like this. I wouldn't care if we got lost on the top of this hill and nobody found us again. It would be fun living in that old wooden hut and cooking you crab-apples and making salads with dandelion leaves. But I hadn't thought about not telling Alix. I can't see any reason why we shouldn't. You've told your family.'

'Yes, but that's different. Mother is resigned to me, and she'll only make a fuss for a day or two; they will both say I've treated Mother badly by not giving her any warning. Then they'll shrug their shoulders and get tired of talking about me, and Felicity will say, "But it's just like Oliver. You spoil him, Mother. It started by letting him take those rooms in Chelsea." Then they'll wait patiently until I take you to see them; and they'll both be terribly sorry for you, and wonder how long it will last.'

Susan smiled. She had a clear picture of Oliver's family, for he had a talent for so picturing people that they grew to life as he described them. And she thought there was nothing even they could tell her about him that she did not know.

'Perhaps they are right. Perhaps you'll have got over me in a week or two. How do *you* know?' She watched an ant on its laborious way through the dry, powdery ground, dragging behind it a piece of the bark of a tree which it seemed to need for some obscure purpose of its own.

'I don't know. It's all very odd.' He rolled over and lay playing with the short grass, twining it round his fingers. 'I really do believe in the theories I've practised. I should be practising them with you, if you weren't somehow different. If you hadn't been exactly as you are, I should have been living with you before this.'

'Noble and reformed character!'

'Oh, my respectability is entirely selfish. Don't flatter yourself. I shouldn't be afraid you'd get frightened by some perfectly ordinary thing, like a pair of shoes left about in the drawing-room. And you'd disappear. But you're so conscientious that I believe the marriage vow would hold you. Odd, with your enlightened views.'

'It wouldn't be the marriage vow that would hold me. It would be because I feel, too, that it's different for you, this time.'

'You make me feel rather as if the Lord had sent a messenger to me in the night, all clad in white and with a halo round its head, and a star in its hand, or something suitable, saying, "Bid her awake..."'

'Perhaps you need me as a sort of ballast.'

'Ballast! You! You scrap of thistledown!' He teased her, tweaking her hair, filling the little hollow in the curve of her elbow with the gathered seeds of grasses. And Susan was quite content, for her heart was so wrapped in security that she was quite happy to have him play with the idea of her impermanence.

But now she broke off from his desultory conversation and returned to the first point of her attack.

'We must be sensible, darling. We can't stay with Simeon and Maxine for ever.'

'Why not? We would be a charming pair of accessories about the house. Maxine would call us the Love Birds and make us part of the show of Stapley.'

'Lunatic! You are frightfully conceited. Do you think you're such an Adonis that people would want to look at you? I shall have to go back to London.'

'Because I'm such an Adonis? Look at your logic, my little scholar.'

'Oh, Oliver, stop being such an idiot! We must make plans. You know quite well that Maxine and Simeon want to go on to the party that this American friend of theirs is giving on his yacht. And Alix, you see, wants to go away. I've had my holiday; I can't refuse to go back.'

'I don't see why the house needs either of you. It would be a great deal more peaceful for your lodgers without you.'

'I must go back. Perhaps another week; it wouldn't matter for a few days. This party at Brightlingsea doesn't begin for a week. What are you going to do? It seems too foolish for you to come back to London. You'd better accept the yacht invitation. Only, my dear — my dear — don't lose me! Don't let me go!' She turned to him in distress, and he took her to him and comforted her, in the peculiar way he had of doing all things, with a charming ease and a touch of mockery.

Susan wrote to Alix that she would be back the next week, and told Maxine and Simeon of her decision.

'I wish you would come on the yacht with us,' Maxine said, for she liked Susan, and, without being able to give precision to her thoughts, felt afraid for her, and pitied her, much as Jennifer did.

Lisa aroused herself and was very nice to Susan, helping her pack, talking to her in odd moments, discussing books and poetry that Susan had almost forgotten; for she had left her days of study behind her as if they and the world of books were on the other side of a door she had closed.

Now all the days turned about the person of Oliver, the more since they were overhung with the nearness of a separation: from the early mornings, when he would wake her by rapping on her window, and they would go out over the misty fields and walk, and talk, and plan away a lifetime before breakfast, till the dark and lovely nights, when they would go out together to say good-night in the solitude and quiet of the garden, after an evening spent in dancing or at cards in a dream in which they were the only two living figures.

So they came to the day of her departure, when she woke in the morning with the same fresh delight; and was quickly flung down, by the thought of leaving Stapley, into a mood of misery and depression.

In this mood she left, in spite of Oliver's quick and — under his teasing manner — comforting sympathy, and in spite of her own great efforts to throw the black mood off. But the tight grasp of her lover's hand, and the knowledge of his deep affection and her own steadfastness reassured her; and by the time the train drew into the fog-hung gloom of Paddington, she was afar off in her imagination, and therefore happier.

She found Alix in a confusion of packing, and in a very bad temper; in a hurry to be done, for she was leaving the next morning. The evening was all the stranger for its complete change from the atmosphere of the last weeks and left her feeling dazed and desolate; missing Oliver everywhere she turned — his love, his mockery, and the look of his hands, the shape of his head, his voice. She slept too heavily, and woke in confusion. Alix breakfasted in silence, and, when Susan asked where she was going:

'Give me a pencil,' she said, 'you'd better have the address. I don't know how long I shall be away, but I am a little more practical than you are.' Susan took up the paper and read the cramped, fine writing:

C/o Vivian Basseter, Esquire,
S.Y. Amalfi,
Brightlingsea.

The words leaped and plunged about the paper. For the same address, in Oliver's writing, was already folded next to her heart.

'Good-bye,' said Alix, with the quick kiss of habit. 'Don't go getting into mischief. Good-bye, Penny.'

Susan waved from the window, unable to explain to herself, or tackle in any way her overwhelming dread. In a moment the taxi had gone, leaving the road to the occupation of two cats — a black and a tabby — and a man hawking flowers in a green-painted barrow. Susan turned back to the untidy room and began, automatically, to put it in order.

Then it occurred to her that she had said nothing to Alix of Oliver, and the crystal powder-bowl that she held in her hand was jerked away by the tumult of her own quickening pulses and crashed into a cascade of tiny pieces on the floor.

CHAPTER THREE

So far that summer had been a time of lazy sunshine; mornings hung about with the light mist that promises a fine day; days of brilliant skies and white clouds; sunsets so red-gold that they touched the tips of the trees and the edges of buildings with a halo of fire. The nights were quietly filled with stars, or steeped in warm, light rain. Leaves in London and out of it were turning a finer colour than any of the children who — as July became a memory and September slipped away to join it — joyfully shuffled through the drifts upon the ground could remember. Old men plodding along country roads, with the patient, shuffling gait peculiar to the tramp, stopped to fill their blackened pipes and, as they did so, looked up into a maze of red and gold that the sunlight outlined till it seemed to be a shower of burnished coins.

But now rain-clouds, uneasy and shifting, their edges unravelled by the wind, took the colour from trees and ground, from wall and roof and chimney. The tramp, turning over the coppers in his pockets, gave a look to the sky and set off for the nearest town, where in a storm a workhouse might shelter him. Women in the crowded, narrow streets of London looked up at the clouds as they hung out upon a line their odds and ends of washing and spoke to their neighbours.

'Looks as though the weather's broke up.'

'Bet yer life it 'as. 'Tain't much use hangin' out them things. Rain'll be on 'em before yer git a chance to fetch 'em in.'

Susan watched the river grow metallic and cold under the threatening sky; the wind whipped a fine, cold spray against the Embankment. The trees gave up their leaves with a last frantic gesture of protesting branches; horses, dogs, and cats prepared in their individual way for the coming of rain. Only human beings went about ignoring the signs of the weather, shutting windows against the wind, and drawing curtains to hide the night. Susan sat at the window and let the dark creep in; the queer light of the sky reflected palely in a looking-glass.

Alix had been away nearly a month. Jennifer was in Italy; Jane Ridley in Scotland. Viola had had the letter that Lisa's cards had promised her, and had gone to stay with an aunt in Yorkshire. Amorel was busy rehearsing for a musical comedy that she had decided to go on tour with at the beginning of January, after playing it during the Christmas season at a theatre in the outskirts of

London. Jeremy, after struggling during the summer with a cough that had seemed all the more unnatural for being out of season, had succumbed to it and was in a nursing-home — a thin, shadowy Jeremy, grateful for Susan's visits, but not strong enough to keep up his pretence of strength even for the hour or so she stayed with him.

So Susan had been very much alone; a stranger to herself, transformed and possessed by her love for Oliver. And Oliver did not write, except now and again a short irrelevant verse or note on an odd scrap of paper; laughing at her expressed depth of affection, or his own; denunciating himself as an inadequate and undependable lover. And Alix's letters, by their inconsequence and light-heartedness, woke in Susan an uneasiness that had become the constant companion of her days, waiting to spring upon her at times like this, when the mood of Nature so intimately reflected her own.

Are you having a very boring time, poor Sue? Are the Craig and the Allen frightening you into having the geyser mended and the front door painted? Soon I'll be back to protect you. I expect, since you're having such rotten weather, ours will break up soon. The wind's a bit colder to-day, but the sun is so hot still that we hardly notice it.

Simeon and Maxine went yesterday, but the rest of us will be staying as long as the weather lasts. They are rather an amusing crowd; your retiring friend, Oliver, is entertaining. Patty Brune from 'High Heels' is coming down for the week-end, which seems to thrill everybody.

Would you send me down my white sweater with the monogram on the pocket? And, Susan, would you go to Peter Jones and get a white skirt pleated at the sides and put it down to my account? And in the cupboard by the fireplace you'll find a tea-gown — you know, the cherry-coloured one. I want that, too. Address them *Poste Restante*, because we may be going off for a bit, and I can collect them when we get back to Brightlingsea.

If a letter from Andrew comes for me, will you forward it on?...

But in Oliver's notes there was no mention of Alix, nor of any one there. He might have been staying in Hindustan, except for one or two rare paragraphs in which the beauty of the level broads seemed to force him to write of them, so that Susan might share them. But these passages were few and seemed grudging, as if he were unwilling to let her be too closely connected with his days.

So it was that Susan was sitting in the window, matured in an extraordinarily short time from the child with whom Oliver had fallen in love; her very affection changed into an aching passion that was as different from the happy confidence of the days of Stapley as the fierce beauty and intensity of autumn was different from the suns of summer.

Yet, in spite of her longing and her disappointment, the knowledge of her own love, and the assurances she held of Oliver's, would not let her quite yield to depression; so that she lived in a curious state, with the strands of her fear and her hope not interwoven at all, but continuing side by side, like skeins of different-coloured thread. Only Andrew's letters — sober, or comical, or nonsensical in turn — made any link between these curious days and the life that seemed to lie so very far away behind her.

As she watched the river — misted over now, especially under the bridge, which might have held a smugglers' boat and a gang of pirates without betraying them, so deep and dark did the river flow there — she saw without taking any particular notice a telegraph-boy turn round the corner on his bicycle, his hands in his pockets, a thin, jaunty figure silhouetted against the metallic surface of the water. She watched him with pleasure, he was so lithe and young and self-confident, saw him dismount, lean the bicycle against the lamp-post, and turn up towards the window from which she watched him. She heard the ringing of her own doorbell, Penny's footsteps in the hall, the opening door.

She opened the envelope, and spread out the thin slip of paper.

DONT SEND PARCEL COMING HOME ALIX

'There's no answer,' said Susan; and sat again by the window. Penny went softly out. But Susan, though she was looking at him, did not see the telegraph-boy jump on his bicycle again, snatching at a leaf on the lowest bough of the plane tree, and swerve round the corner onto the Embankment. She was trying to raise her spirits from the abyss they had fallen into, wondering why she was so very sure that Alix's telegram held a hidden and calamitous meaning for herself.

When Amorel came in, she knocked at Susan's door. She looked very tired, and a little untidy, as she always did when she had been working. Her yellow hair straggled down from under her hat, which she pulled off and threw down. Susan began to lose something of her abnormal fright. Amorel took one of Susan's cigarettes, and sighed deeply. Even her sigh was a lovely intonation of sound. One of Amorel's charms was her speaking voice, so musical a thing that the most commonplace phrase rang out like a tune on the bells, and was pleasanter to hear than any subtle conversation.

She stretched out her perfectly shaped legs, and looked at them with a frown.

'If some goddess or other hadn't given me those as a birthday present, I should probably be earning a respectable salary as secretary to a Society for the Moral Elevation of Backsliding Gentlewomen. It's a dog's life, Susan. We've had that wretched cottage-garden scene over and over again this afternoon. You've no idea what it's like to be pirouetting and smirking about in your best manner, trying hard to behave like a ravishing beauty when you're pining for a cup of tea, and have got a tickle at the back of your nose that means you'll have a cold in the head to-morrow morning...'

Susan had said nothing to Amorel about Oliver; with a superstitious jealousy she kept her secret to herself. But the mention of the stage-set brought Stapley vividly back to mind.

'Have you got a cottage garden?'

'Oh, ye compleat cottage garden, my dear — with thatched roof and hollyhocks and roses round the door, that make me love Mother more... That's where my song comes in:

Everybody likes a love-bird,
  Everybody wants a mate,
  Yet no one finds in me
  The part of Destiny,
I've been neglected by Fate...

Why did you ask me? Are you interested in cottages?'

Susan told her fancy about Stapley, when she woke to see the garden through the neatly curtained window. Amorel laughed.

'Simeon and Maxine are dears, but Simeon will overdo things. When you've got as much money as that, I suppose you must have the perfect thing, every time. He takes such pride in it...'

Amorel's voice spread comfort and normality about the room. Susan made excuse of her presence to switch on the light, arrange chairs comfortably by the fire, draw up a cushion for herself on the floor. She would have liked her to stay — for a long time — until Alix should come home. She did detain her for perhaps an hour, talking of this and of that; of Amorel's odd experiences, one way and another; of Maxine and Simeon, Viola and Jeremy long ago, when they had first got to know one another. But presently the sound of the clock grew to be important, and Amorel realized the time.

'My dear, I must fly! Paul will be so hurt if I'm late again. When's Alix coming home? Tonight? I'm glad. You're looking peaked, here all by yourself...'

When she had gone, silence settled down again. Susan fidgeted with the tray that Penny brought up for her, eating little, bemused with thoughts. She was just going to make herself take a walk when the sharp raising of a taxi's flag struck in upon her thoughts, like a tiny pebble flung into a pond. Foreboding and a real terror were suddenly about her; she raised her hands as if these fiends were in the air, and she could beat them off. Alix, walking into the room, saw her standing there in an attitude almost of self-defence, an odd figure in the firelight. She switched on the light, and the bright flood showed her immaculate and lovely, her eyes shining and her graceful limbs easy and lissom as she walked.

'Goodness me, Susan, you're looking at me as if I were a burglar! You're not hiding a pistol anywhere, are you? Didn't you get my wire?'

She took off her gloves and fur, hat and coat; combed her hair, and patted its dark curls into a charming frame for her face. Susan walked away from the fire, trying to quiet her fears and to answer in an ordinary voice. 'Yes, I had your wire — about three hours ago. What happened?'

But Alix took no notice of the question; she spoke instead of the yacht, the weather, the adventures they had had with storms and tides; the bathing achievements of Ralph Truscott and herself. But she made no mention of her sudden change of plans, nor what had caused them. Yet Susan was sure that disaster was in the air, and waited for news of it; as if a storm-cloud, hanging over a stifled and apprehensive earth, were by the first flash of lightning and the first clap of thunder about to be quickened with the possibility of rain.

But, though Alix's manner was odd — her movements too sharp, her voice too changingly inflected, her look and her speech too bright — she gave no explanations; and presently she sighed, and stretched her arms above her head, and walked over to the window.

'Me for bed — *à l'instant*,' she said. 'No, my dear, I'm too tired even to care whether anything's unpacked or not.'

Already she had slipped her frock over her head, and was quickly stripping herself of further garments. As Susan stood uncertainly at the door, her sister called to her to switch off the light. Susan touched the switch; in a bound the room was swallowed up in darkness. Then, as if released from a spell, the fire suddenly burned with a more vehement leaping of the flames, and illumined with a ruddy glow the naked loveliness of Alix.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE next day Susan wrote to Oliver:

> You must send me a letter, darling. I can see you frown and nibble at your nails with impatience. But it's no good, you must write to me. I am frightened, and I don't know why. But it is a week since I heard from you; and I don't know if you have told Alix about us, or if you want me not to...
>
> I went round to your little house to-day, and Mrs. Brown let me in. It was such fun seeing it without you. I sat on the stool by the empty fire, and looked at the chair you have punished so severely, with the spring bulging out of it underneath; and asked the room to tell me something about you. And it did, such a lot. An obliging room...
>
> Aren't you frightened? I thought of all your love-letters that must be tucked away in corners. (I'm sure you're untidy about them; I'm sure a blackmailer would only have to open a drawer to find enough material to keep him for years.) But I was very happy sitting there. I could hear the chickens clucking in the garden the other side of the wall. It might have been in the country, except for a gramophone in one of the studios. And I forgave that, for it was playing 'Poor little rich girl.' Do you remember?
>
> Write to me, Oliver. When are you coming back?

She would not ask Alix directly about him. She did ask — trying to make her voice sound casual — why there had been such a sudden change of plans; but Alix only answered, too lightly, that the party had grown boring; that most of them were dispersing, and that the weather had suddenly altered — it was really pleasanter in London.

Three days later came Oliver's answer. He wrote from Devonshire.

Well, I suppose you know now. It's no use writing. As soon as I've got this goddam leg mended, I'll come back. You'd better forget all about me. You'd never understand in a thousand years — not if Pluto came up from Hades to stick up for me. It's damned lonely down here. I wonder what kind of letter you're expecting, under the circumstances. I suppose I ought to end up 'your humble servant.' Oh, God, what a farce! For I *do* love you, Susan, much more than you'll ever want to know now. You ought to have listened to the people who warned you against me — though I warned you myself, didn't I? I do love you. I'm damned if I know why, or which side of you I'm in love with. But I believe I always shall. Probably you'll be my own particular purgatory, for I don't suppose you'll want to see me again...

Susan sat reading this letter with the world spinning about her; finding it easier to believe the disaster that lay hidden under the phrases — for her inner consciousness had warned her of this for so long — than the actual sight of the written words, the minutely formed letters that even in pencil made so sharp a mark upon the paper. Alix had bought some goldfish, and, in a bowl whose green glass was mottled with bubbles, the strange creatures were swimming to and fro. Susan found herself staring at them, wondering if they were conscious of the regular exaggerated movements of their inflating and deflating gills.

'I don't suppose you'll want to see me again...'

Alix, humming a song, walked lightly into the room. She saw Susan's white and stricken face, the paper trembling in her hand, and the foreign-looking envelope that Oliver always affected lying on the floor. Alix stood checked in her smooth pace, as some one might hesitate who, treading a pleasant path, hears a clear warning of danger.

'What's the matter? What's happened?' In another mood Susan could have told a great deal from Alix's voice; but now she heard nothing beyond the spoken words.

'Nothing.' She got up and folded the letter over and over again, until it was a small tight packet in her hand. 'What happened on the yacht to Oliver?'

Alix turned her back, feeding the goldfish from a paper bag.

'Oh, he got binged one night, and fell down the companionway, and broke his leg.'

'Why didn't you tell me? Was that why the party broke up?'

'Good Lord, no. Why should it? He went off to stay with an aunt in Devonshire. I believe, as a matter of fact, he was put in splints by a doctor in Brightlingsea, and somebody — Walter Bond — motored him straight away down to Taunton. Why? I didn't know you were so interested in him. Has he written to you? What does he say?'

'Oh, nothing much. It's all right. I only wondered.'

Alix threw the empty paper into the fire, and Susan stood watching the bright flames leap up to it, and throw it up the chimney, where it hung like a blazing balloon, until the flames, tired of the game, left it, and it collapsed into floating scraps of blackened tissue, tumbling down again on the coals and into the hearth.

'I'm going out,' said Susan, suddenly; and in a minute, without hat or coat, was walking at an exhausting pace down the Embankment.

Now not only Susan, but the house itself, the trees that overlooked the house, and all the people in it seemed to know that a crisis was impending. Susan began to be a prey to nervous imaginings.

In the long nights, when she could not sleep, she thought she could sense other occupants of her room; ghosts she could not see, but could hear — soft small sounds like breathing, and a shuffling walk. In the day she was ashamed of these moments of alarm; and by accustoming herself to them, grew to listen for her nightly visitants. But whether the house was yielding up to her its secret watchers, or whether these encounters were the fruit of her tired and disorganized senses, she could not discover. She grew to avoid Alix, and did not know whether it was her fancy that Alix was relieved, or whether her sister could also feel calamity in the air.

When Jane Ridley came back from Scotland the second week in November, she was at once drawn into the hidden current which seemed to be shaping their lives. On her first evening in the house Alix invited her to dine with them; but she could not, having another engagement. When, after dinner, she got back, Alix called her in to have a cigarette. Susan, wrapped in her own troubles, scarcely listened to what they said; but in an abstracted way she noticed that Alix's voice grew sharper, and Jane's more drawling.

'My dear, it's your own affair. But if you want to know what I think, I'll tell you. Don't try to rekindle dead ashes. It's a waste of time...'

'You talk as if I were some sort of a harpy...'

'People will talk if you give them material. They are talking about the Amalfi.'

'I really don't see what business it is of yours.'

Alix's voice suddenly snapped, with as harsh a sound as a breaking wire.

'It was none — until you made it so.'

Susan looked from one to the other. Alix's cheeks were scarlet; her whole body stiff, as the trunk of an aspen, though its leaves may tremble, stiffens against the wind. Her fingers twisted at the fabric of the chair she sat in. Jane did not appear to be disturbed, and her comfort of pose whipped Alix's temper. Susan, hearing the name Amalfi, felt sick and faint. She was afraid of hearing something that, if she must hear it, she had no wish to discover in such a way. She got up and went out of the room without being noticed by Alix at all, though Jane saw her, and smiled, as she passed.

Lying shivering in bed, Susan heard through the dividing door the continued trend of their quarrel: Jane's voice growing deeper, Alix's raised in fury. Suddenly there was a crash, then the sound of Alix in a storm of crying. Then silence, until Jane spoke again, shortly, once. She walked across the room, the door opened and shut, then there was the sound of her quiet footsteps on the stairs. Susan, listening for some other sound, was torn between her new dread of Alix, and the old mood of loyal affection which would have taken her into the other room to persuade Alix to bed, and smooth her pillow, and in various small ways make easier her repose. But a trembling seized her, and she did not go; and instead drifted into a restless and nightmarish sleep.

The next morning, within five minutes of one another, two little notes were put upon the table outside Alix's door, expressing the regret of Miss Craig and Miss Allen that they would no longer be able to occupy their rooms. The notes were pleasantly worded, but there was something about the manner in which they were presented, and the turn of the phrasing, that conveyed a hidden meaning. Alix found in them a great source of humour, made mock of them, gave them to Susan to read.

'They must have heard the row last night. Lord, how damned funny!' Then she as quickly sobered. 'Well, we must get somebody else. We can't afford to have the rooms empty. Most of the household money for this quarter has gone already.' They spent the morning writing and answering advertisements.

In the afternoon Jennifer telephoned. Alix answered; then, raising her eyebrows, called Susan. '*Your* friend, Miss Field,' she said; and listened with a smile while Susan, eagerly, arranged to go round to Church Street for tea.

'Are there any other of my friends who interest you? Would you like me to make an appointment with Midget or Ralph?' Alix spoke lightly, but her whole manner was jerky and hysterical. 'They all seem to be going over on to your side. Anybody would think I were a monster.'

Susan looked at her unhappily.

'I — I haven't meant it to happen ——'

'Oh, Lord, don't be so sentimental. You don't think I care, do you? Go round to your Jennifer.' Alix picked up a book, and gathered all the cushions into a comfortable heap on the divan.

Jennifer's house was as restful to Susan as a calm green valley is to eyes wearied by the confining vision of streets and chimney-pots. Jennifer herself, in a long, purple dressing-gown that, with its edging of fur, gave her a charming air of discretion, welcomed her without getting up.

'I've sprained my ankle,' she said, lifting the soft satin to show a bandaged foot in a low-cut purple slipper, 'so come and sit on this cushion. Tell me what's been happening to you while I've been away. You look tired.' She stroked the girl's head, as she sat on the floor at her feet.

'Oh, nothing — really nothing. Tell me about yourself. Have you had a lovely time?'

Jennifer noticed the strain in her, and her nervous movements. She talked pleasantly: of Italy, and the people whose acquaintance she had made there; of the ridiculous letters she had had from Andrew; of the amusing shawl she had brought home for Susan, which was not yet unpacked. Slowly Susan began to grow more soothed by the soft cadences of her voice, and the ease of her manner. Presently they fell silent. Jaqueline, the young devoted girl who served and guarded Jennifer with a passionate affection, brought tall candles into the room, as if she sensed that any brighter light would disturb the serenity of the moment.

'I wish I had known you earlier,' said Susan, clasping her hands round Jennifer's knee, and staring into the flames.

'You didn't like me, did you?'

'I saw you round Alix's shadow. I didn't really know you.'

'Alix's shadow,' answered Jennifer quietly, 'has a way of putting a strange appearance on things. I know that, too. It sometimes — seems to distort whatever it falls on. But it's only a temporary enchantment, you know. It passes.'

Susan looked up in surprise that she should have spoken words so pertinent to the situation. Although Jennifer was thinking of something quite different — as was evident from the look on her face — the chance remark comforted Susan greatly; and she went back to sleep, peacefully, for the first time for many weeks.

After she had gone, and was lying in her narrow bed — a small, prim virginal couch, that accentuated the childishness in her face and figure — Jennifer lay awake wondering what might have happened: having given out all her strength in comforting Susan, she was now herself weary and acutely sensitive, turning her thought this way and that to account for the premonition she had of an approaching storm. Then the pain in her ankle obscured the complicated voyaging of her mind, and, ringing for Jaqueline, she gave up her mental concentration to submit to the trials and compensations of being a temporary invalid.

CHAPTER FIVE

IN THE first week of December, with a scurry of sleet and a wind that bitterly whipped the surface of the river, and drove with bowed heads before it those barges that had sails, Oliver came back to London.

Susan was out when he telephoned, and was given a message by Penny.

'I was to ask you, Miss, if you could possibly meet him by the statue in Pimlico Gardens, round about three o'clock. He said he would wait as long as he could there. But he would quite understand if you didn't go.'

He was there. She could see him as soon as she turned into the Gardens. He was standing, in an old white mackintosh, with his back to the Epstein sculptures; his head down-bent, hands deep in pockets. But he looked up at once, as if he sensed the nearness of her approach; and his eyes peered out at her with a fierce and impatient look, as if he were cursing the dispensations of Providence which had given him only material and inadequate vision.

'Hullo,' he said, without any kind of smile or welcome, 'you've come.'

'Did you think that I wouldn't?' Susan, who had planned many conversations in her head, was frustrated by her own tumbling emotions.

'Didn't know. Shouldn't have blamed you if you hadn't.' This time he did smile; but was quickly frowning again. He was realizing the weather in relation to Susan; saw that she was cold, that her feet must be wet, that this was no place for a meeting. Yet none of this had occurred to him before; he had chosen the Gardens simply for the associations they held for him and for Susan.

'We'd better get somewhere out of this,' he said, taking in the whole of the weather with a gesture. 'Shall we — would you ——'

'If we get on a bus' — Susan looked up at him, and found her unhappiness already departed, since she was with him again — 'we could find one with a covered top, and talk there. It's easier to talk in something that's moving.'

Oliver immediately turned towards the road. He strode along, in spite of his leg, with a loping walk that he was too proud and impatient to admit to be a limp. Susan, hurrying beside him, did not care whether they talked or not; whether they found a bus or continued to walk along the Embankment; or whether, indeed, the whole world were to turn suddenly topsy-turvy, so long as she could continue in this isolated nearness to her lover. But when Oliver halted a little, and dragged his leg painfully, scowling at his own weakness, she put away from her all thoughts except the finding of a bus; and this they did as soon as they turned into Whitehall.

Behind them the grey buildings of Westminster shot the wet pavements through with their reflections; the grass of Parliament Square was as vivid as a green flame. The sky was so fiercely torn with wind that it was like a living thing; the clouds, racing across it, seemed to have a purpose concerned with humanity. The sleet had turned to a sharp thin rain. Everybody who crossed a road or climbed onto a bus, or turned to stare at the Abbey, or looked for the time to Big Ben, was drawn into the picture like a tiny scrap of a jigsaw puzzle.

Susan, swinging easily up the steps of the rolling bus, called upon the brotherly elements to help her in whatever crisis was about to be forced upon her love. She thought that, were a miracle needed, there would be a miracle; had she wanted the heavens to witness, the sky would have opened to let a messenger of truth descend. There was no one else on the top of the bus, and she and Oliver, perched on the front seat, had as fine a monopoly of the view of London as any pigeon who preens his feathers from the high roof of Saint Paul's. As they sat there without speaking, they saw a clerk bent at his desk in the Foreign Office; two girls walking boldly and merrily with a couple of soldiers, swaggering along as if their spirits had caught something of the gay colour that at one time would have decked out the uniforms of their escorts. A woman, and a man with a little child on his shoulder, stood staring up at the Horse Guards, as if those valiant men had been made of stone, and so indifferent to the gaze of the populace. The rain beat upon the bare paved surface of Trafalgar Square, hammering it into a polished mirror to reflect the sky.

'Tell me,' said Oliver, as the bus swerved round into Pall Mall, 'what Alix told you. If we're going to have it out, we may as well start from the beginning.'

'Alix hasn't told me anything. I didn't know in the least what you meant by your letter. I knew just by the feeling I had in my bones that something had gone wrong.'

Oliver looked at her sideways, as if he suspected her of deceiving him.

'I was wretched all the time Alix was away. Then, when she came back so suddenly, I was sure she was going to bring me bad news. It wasn't because you didn't write: I didn't expect you to.

But when I asked her questions — just idle ones, to ease my mind — she put me off. So I knew I was right.'

'Then my letter ——'

'Your letter was frightful. Because, you see, even then I didn't know what had happened. I don't know now. Aren't *you* going to tell me, Oliver?'

Oliver was astounded, and at a loss. For so many weeks he had grown accustomed to the idea of her knowledge; he had turned over a dozen ways she might have accepted it, framed a dozen explanations and apologies, and knew all of them to be useless. Now he leaned forward, watching the accumulated raindrops trickle in a slow stream from the brim of his hat; his mind working with a burning clarity.

'Well, you know that something happened; serious enough to make me think you'd never want to have anything to do with me again. What do you feel about it? Before I tell you?'

'I can't feel anything frightfully definite, now I'm with you again. It's only when I'm away from you that I want all the usual trappings — faithfulness, and devotion, and letters, and reassurance, and constancy. With you, I just know that in some way our kind of communion is worth taking risks.'

'Susan — darling. Oh, God, it seems too wonderful to be true! I wonder if you would trust me again. Darling, I didn't go as far as being unfaithful to you. But I did make a complete and public fool of myself. I can't help it. I do get carried off my feet by people, and forget about every one and everything else. I did — fall for somebody pretty badly. I didn't care what happened — even — listen, Susan — even if I lost you: you must understand, it was as bad as that. I don't think she knew anything at all about you and me; but she might have done. I think that would have spurred her on.' He scowled again at a memory. Then continued: 'I would have made love to her there on the yacht; I would have gone away with her. D'you see, darling? There were no half-measures about it. But she played with me, neither keeping me off nor letting me get much nearer; and one night I had too many cocktails, and there was fizz for dinner, and I was — drunk. And I tried to make love to her in front of everybody, and disgraced myself. She slipped away when I was maundering on, kissing her hand or something — I don't remember — and I ran after her, and fell down the companionway, and did this leg in.

'Somebody — Bond, a decent sort of fellow — took me to a doctor, and then drove me down to

Devonshire. I had been going to my aunt there in a few days, anyway. I was quite sober by the time we arrived. I didn't hear what happened on the yacht. I supposed they just hushed it up.'

Susan had gone very still; she was not noticing the streets at all now, but fixed her gaze on the clouds and the chimney-pots, trying to escape from the immediate landscape into some remoter region where she could meet this new and appealing Oliver in an adequate way. At her silence some of his sincerity left him, and, watching her sharply, he grinned.

'Now say your little piece, my dear, and get it over. Oh, I deserve it. You didn't think I was quite like that? You are shocked, though you thought you were so modern and unshockable? Well, I may as well tumble all my thoughts into your chaste little hands, and be done with them.' Again his voice changed. 'I do mean it when I say I love you, and want to be faithful to you. There is something different in the relationship between you and me. If we could hang on together I think I would — reform, I suppose you'd call it. That sounds like Mother.

'Probably it isn't fair to suggest that we should go on. It's not what you call honourable, is it, to ask anybody to be tied to such a doubtful proposition? I might leave you in the lurch on the wedding-night, or something — sorry, my darling — sweetheart — I didn't mean to hurt you. I thought you would laugh with me. It's no good, anyway, pretending that I'm a responsible sort of a creature, or likely to change in a hurry. But I do mean what I say. And you do love me, don't you? After all, we could always get out of it again if — you found it wasn't worth while?'

Susan again was silent; but Oliver had no need to hear any speech from her. He received her answer immediately, in her look, the proud straightening of her body, the touch of her hand. He took both her hands in his, and gripped them as if they were a bolt, and he the lock that held them. He kissed their finger-tips, and with Susan stared out in a strange fierce mood of mingled joy and peace upon the road ahead of them.

'You haven't told me,' said Susan at last, rather slowly, 'whom it was you fell in love with. Was that on purpose?'

'Look here,' he answered, 'do you think you could — not ask me that? I want to forget it, and her, and everything but you and the fun we can have together. That sounds even more selfish than my ordinary tactics. But I mean it seriously. It's my best chance. If we could simply drop her right out, and go on as if nothing had happened. After all, nothing did happen really.'

'You do expect — rather a lot, don't you?'

'I know I do.' At once he was humble.

'You see, I thought — but I can't blame you for what I thought, can I?'

'I must have made you think it.'

'I told you I was going to wear my rose-coloured spectacles. You laughed at me then. It's my own fault.'

'You know, when I rang up and asked you to meet me, I had no idea about trying to go on with it. I only wanted to explain, and clear things up a bit; and — see you again, I suppose. It was frightful knowing you were near, and not seeing you. There's something about you that makes staggering things settle back simply into place. I know that really for you this has been a big thing — much bigger, probably, than it would ever have been for me. Do you know — no, that's not quite fair, even from me.'

'Go on.'

'I was going to say the most appalling thing.'

'Say it.'

'I was going to relieve myself of the disappointment of not getting — her — after all. I found myself longing for your sympathy, I was so sure you would understand. As if it were some one else's affair altogether.'

'Oh, darling, darling, aren't you hopeless?'

Susan was laughing now. If Oliver had been one degree less fantastic in his treatment of the situation, she knew she would have nursed the pain of it until, like a bogy, it would have been perpetually between them. But how could she, loving him so, stand out against such a tremendous appeal to her love and her vanity?

'God! What a relief to hear you laugh!'

A curious little sound behind them, like a cough strangled in its inception, made them both look round at once; Susan with flaming cheeks. For a second she met the round, bright eye of a little man who must have been sitting on the next seat for a long time; then he bent his head over the filling of a tobacco-pouch, and all she could see was the greenish top of an old bowler hat, a wrinkled suit, and two enormous hands that trembled as they held the wallet. She avoided Oliver's look; it was as if two people, talking intimately in the dark, had been thrust apart by the lighting of a lamp, so violently were they separated by the knowledge of this eavesdropping little man, whose right to his knowledge was as clear as theirs to their bus tickets, and for whom the entertainment must have been almost as exciting, and quite as original, as a sixpenny seat in the cinema.

Oliver felt the more foolish of the two, being, really, more self-conscious. Susan, tense with embarrassment, sat beside him as primly as a chaperon who finds herself in a circumstance she disapproves of. Then she saw the dear familiar twisting and untwisting of Oliver's fingers, so invariable a sign of his embarrassment; and looking suddenly straight up at him, she laughed again, this time in pure amusement, her eyes alight above her red-flushed cheeks.

'Let's get off here,' she said, 'and have some tea. I'm hungry.'

'Oh, bless you, bless you!' he chuckled into her ear as he stood aside for her to precede him; and, with a last magnificent gesture, he took off his hat and bowed to the little man, who now flushed in his turn under the dark stubble of an unshaven beard, but without resentment, for Oliver's mockery held no malice.

Oliver and Susan renewed their peace over the faded tablecloth in the upper room of a Hampstead tea-shop; though they were careful, this time, to make sure that they had no audience. Love grew up strongly between them, like a thirsty plant after rain, in the joy of their reconciliation. The weather, as if to prove Susan's feeling right about its brotherliness, had been growing steadily clearer, and now, though the wind was still cold, had parted the clouds to let through the broad pale light of the sun. A ray of it fell across their hands, lying one in the other on the table; and Oliver, lifting an eyebrow, fumbled in his waistcoat pocket.

'Now, my lass, I'm going to give you a chance to mock at me.' From the pocket he brought out an envelope; out of the envelope, a case; from the case, a ring.

'I bought this,' he said, 'in Devonshire, because it seemed to belong to you. And because I thought it might find you for me again — you know, like a water-diviner's rod.'

He put it on her finger, and Susan looked with delight at the lovely thing. It did, indeed, seem suited to her; a light-hearted, delicate little posy, a cluster of pearls and amethysts, a ring with only half a hold on reality.

'With this ring,' he teased her, 'I thee endow...'

She shivered as if the sun had suddenly gone in again; but there the broad beam lay still, pale yellow, like a field of cowslips. She chid her superstitious thought, and thrust it away from her.

'Come on, Oliver,' she said, jumping up from the table, and pulling him by the hand, 'there's a lot of lost time to make up. And we shall so soon have to let to-day go by to make room for to-morrow ——'

And, like a couple of happy children, they went clattering down the stairs.

CHAPTER SIX

December, a wise and tolerant month, free of the trappings of spring and summer, and therefore better able, perhaps, to nourish the rare blooms that it can so proudly show, saw a second flowering of Susan's love.

She looked back on her weeks of foreboding with scorn and pity. She laughed at herself for her intensity of feeling; threw off all clinging fears, and gave herself up to joy. Looking back afterwards on that time, she saw it as a brief blinding revelation of happiness, and was inclined to self-pity, since she had been so duped by it, and so unprepared for its ending. But actually as she lived through it, each day was as whole and perfect as a dewdrop on a rose, and turned as fair a surface to reflect the glory of the world.

The rose had its thorn in the persistent refusal of Oliver to meet, or to run any risk of meeting, Alix. But it was a small thing to cavil at; and Oliver was so gay a lover, so charming and contented, so adept in all the subtleties that Susan's young inexperience needed, that she came to look upon all the world as her home: she would have slept as soundly, and with as great a confidence of security, under the bare trees of Hampstead Heath as between the four white walls of her own room.

One of the first happenings after Oliver's return was her introduction to his family. He had telephoned to her, asking her to meet him, begging her, mysteriously, to wear a certain yellow frock that he liked, and counteracting the effect of too obvious a compliment by a particular request to comb her hair, powder her nose, and wear the clean gloves of respectability that he had himself long since discarded.

When he met her, he took off her gloves — while she submitted, puzzled and interested — and, before she could stop him, threw them both into the river, where they made as incongruous a piece of flotsam as could well be imagined.

'Thy taste, O Susannah, was better than mine. Your hands, brown paddocks that they are, do not look well in gloves. At last we are going to undertake the Great Adventure. We're going to Face the Family.'

'What *has* happened to you, my dear? Have you suddenly grown a sense of responsibility? Or is it the conventions troubling you at last?'

'I rang them up, and told them I was bringing you to lunch.'

'What did your mother say?'

'I didn't speak to Mother. I gave the message to Kate — Kate's the parlour-maid. She's the only one of the whole household who understands me. She's told me from the age of two upwards when my face was dirty, or the seat of my trousers torn, or when there were people in the drawing-room I didn't want to meet. I can rely upon Kate.'

'You're more nervous than I am.'

'I'm afraid Mother will feel it her duty to warn you against me. And mothers have a sort of advantage. It's quite unfair; Mother sees something when she looks at me that you simply wouldn't recognize. In fact, it's ridiculous to call them both Oliver Rand. But you might be swayed.'

'You never know. I like hearing both sides. You've had too long an innings; it's time I listened to some one else.' Susan pulled a face at him, in a way that made Oliver feel immeasurably superior. 'You're a great hulking bully, you know, standing over me with a cudgel, and forcing me to believe in you. Why should I?'

'Can't think,' said Oliver, grinning at her, 'why you do.'

He waved his arms, windmill fashion, to attract a taxi, and a roving driver, after waiting a second or two, unsure whether this man was mad or was really a prospective fare, touched his cap, instantly became alert, and swung the cab round to the kerb.

'Mustn't overdo the leg, you know,' said Oliver; but she knew it was his nervous apprehension, rather than any physical pain, that needed the relief of swift transport.

The black box of the cab swept them through Knightsbridge like a magician's carpet; dizzying them so much by its rapid pace that it was only when a policeman held up the traffic, or a horse-drawn van got between them and a quicker stream of vehicles, that the streets through which they passed settled into a landscape which they had time to focus. They had scarcely set eye on the sward of the Green Park before a sickening swerve to the left took them clean out of Piccadilly. In Shepherd Market they left the loiterers who always adorn one corner or another staring after them. They bumped over the cobblestones, and were out in Curzon Street. Just as it seemed that the cabby must be going to take them boldly up the amazed steps of the Church of Christ Scientist, to the left they turned again, and in another moment had stopped outside a cream-painted house in a side-turning — a house whose only visible portion, from inside the cab, was a green door decently adorned with a smooth brass Number Seven.

Mrs. Rand gave Susan a hand so soft and cool that Susan comprehended the ancient courtesy of kissing a great lady's finger-tips.

'So you are Susan,' she said, in a voice like the clear notes of a small organ. 'We have heard so much about you.' She smiled; and the smile hovered so uncertainly, and was so suddenly gone, that it revealed her, too, to be nervous. 'Oliver, you really must have a new overcoat. Have you ever known anybody so careless about his appearance?' Then it seemed that Mrs. Rand's eyes wandered instinctively to Susan's ungloved hands; so that she felt a quick wish, like a child, to put them guiltily behind her. 'However, we none of us bother very much about appearances these days. I expect luncheon is ready. You haven't met Felicity?'

'How are you?' The voice assailed Susan before any other impression; and it was a voice she liked immediately. She looked with interest into Felicity's charming countenance, which had an expression that is rare now, but must once have been largely responsible for the kindly traditions of the female character; such a gentle sympathy it showed, and so much tolerance.

Then Susan was aware that luncheon had been announced, and she followed Mrs. Rand out of the drawing-room. They sat at a cherry-wood table, polished to a degree that Susan had never seen before. From the walls gilt-framed engravings of men whose brows and noses all bore a resemblance to Oliver stared loftily over the heads of the present generation, to encounter the more suitable regard of one another. Conversation was lightened, not by Oliver, as Susan would have expected — he sat almost silent, avoiding equally the gaze of them all — but by Felicity, who treated Susan with a kindly familiarity, assuming as natural her presence among them, and making loving mock in turn of her brother's gruffness and her mother's regally gracious manner.

The meal over, Mrs. Rand asked Susan to excuse her, and in her gentle way compelled Oliver to follow her to her own room for a serious conversation. Behind his mother's back he gave Susan the encouragement of a long, deliberate wink.

'Don't let Felicity turn you against me, now. She's a soured and disappointed spinster, and her vision's warped.' With this he left them; and Susan turned to make the closer acquaintance of a girl whom she knew at once she could regard with affection.

During the week or two that followed, Felicity was quite as responsible for Susan's happiness as was Oliver. It was easy to discover that she held an almost fanatical love for her brother; she would talk about him to Susan for hours, shrewdly dissecting his character, but always building it up again with a loyal pride that was the best possible kind of cement for such an irregular edifice. If most of the days were spent with Oliver, at least one meal the two girls would take together; or, should twenty-four hours go by without their meeting, one would ring the other up to arrange some expedition. Susan took Felicity to tea with Jennifer; and saw her anticipation of their mutual liking quickly fulfilled. Oliver, rather late, came in to find them; and so passed one of the pleasantest evenings that Susan had to look back on: when Oliver dropped his posing, subtly flattered into honesty by his sister; and Jennifer, noticing everything, saw to it that Susan was not allowed to slip lazily out of the conversation, but took her part in the spinning of the fine web of thoughts and fancies that lightly linked them together in contentment.

Towards Christmas-time Susan's happiness rose to its height. Her youthful scorn of sentiment was already completely cast from her, and though Oliver lashed her with his scorn, and Alix, poking and prying, tried to pierce through her defences, she found great pleasure in the traditional aspects of the season, and revelled, as she had as a child, in the good will and general happiness that she saw — or thought she saw — around her in all kinds and classes of people.

Memories of her own childhood largely contributed to her joy. The very sight of a pasteboard Father Christmas lifted her feet off the solid ground and set her, like Alice in Wonderland, in a world of topsy-turvy proportions. She heard her father's voice; looking at her feet, she expected to see them covered in brown woollen stockings; she stared at her hands, and expected to see there the impress of the cane *chaise-longue* which, drawn up into the sunny window, had been her mother's favourite resting-place.

One morning in Harrod's, when she was choosing a variety of books for presents, the chance-seen cover of an old-fashioned tale took her back to the first illness she could remember, when, with whooping-cough, she had been confined to her nursery, which was overheated, and filled with a pungent steam, according to the traditions of the day. That, too, had been at Christmas-time; and that night had given her her first doubts about good Saint Nicholas. For she had wakened, sharply, to hear a voice strangely like her father's utter a suppressed 'Damnation!' as a sound that Susan got to know afterwards as the squeak of a Teddy Bear coincided with the shifting of a large bulge from the top to the bottom of the pillow-case that served her as a stocking.

With all these extraneous happinesses she continued to load Oliver, until he might have drooped, had he been a less happy-go-lucky individual, under the burden of them all. But he supported his halo charmingly, having learned early in life that the graceful wearing of an undeserved honour is a kinder action than the repudiation of it. And it was certainly true, up to a point, that without him Susan would not have been keyed up to the enjoyment of all these experiences, though actually it was not Oliver himself who was responsible for her happy state so much as her own love, with which she surrounded him.

But the heyday of her happiness was nearly over; and the first indication of its demise came upon Christmas Eve.

Amorel was playing her musical comedy, seasonably transformed until it was more like pantomime, in an outlying suburb. Susan got together a large party for the night of the twenty-fourth.

Simeon and Maxine were out of England; neither of them had very much liking for those English festivities that draw all who are willing to be drawn into the large comfortable bosom of a national family. But Viola was in London, with an engagement-ring on her finger; and Mrs. Rand was asked, but was more suitably represented by Felicity (for Susan, though she behaved very dutifully to Oliver's mother, was too young and too much in love to appreciate her in any but a quite romantic and unreal manner). Jeremy (recovered through the generosity of the Carlows, after a holiday in Madeira), Jennifer, Jane Ridley; Lisa, invited rather unwillingly at Viola's insistent wish; and a round-faced and amusing young man called Bainton, who had been at school with Oliver, and who, unexpectedly thrown upon the Rands for Christmas, because of an infectious illness in his own family, had fitted surprisingly well into the curious collection of people he found himself introduced to: all these set out, with Susan and Oliver, in a flock of taxis for the distant theatre.

Arrived there, they filled a considerable number of seats in the stalls, and roused great interest and some scorn among the candid theatre-goers of the neighbourhood. Bainton, in particular, came in for a good deal of comment, for he had brought with him in his pockets a variety of infantile toys, such as squeaking frogs, balloons that he inflated and then let out with a sigh, and those telescoped papers on wires that, blown vigorously from the mouth, spring out for a yard or so, and hit the unobservant victim on nose or cheek.

'Coo, look at 'im!'

'What's 'e going to do now?'

''Ullo, red-face, chuck us a few up 'ere!'

'Thinks 'e's the funny man at the circus, 'e does.'

Bainton got up and bowed his appreciation of their notice. Immediately he became the audience's friend. His popularity grew almost embarrassing. A playful piece of orange-peel, intended for him, hit Felicity on the cheek. A trouser-button, detached at unimaginable risk to its owner, missed its mark by a few feet, and glanced off Susan's head into the lap of a stranger sitting behind her. It was almost a relief when the lights went down and the curtain up, particularly as Amorel had already, during the short run of the piece, won the hearts of the neighbourhood, and was a popular figure among them, greeted with huzzas and encouraging cries and applause.

She was so much at home upon the stage that she quickly found an opportunity to discover her friends, and gave them a kiss blown from her finger-tips. Principal boy turns, grafted on the original story, showed her at her best. As Little Boy Blue at a fancy-dress dance in the millionaire's country cottage, she had an attraction that linked her up at once with every Christmastide production since the days when the mummers had padded their stomachs with cushions to play the fat jovial friar who, in his day, had provided the jokes of the season.

When the curtain came down, Susan found herself smiling, and noticed that almost everybody else in the audience had unconsciously taken on the same expression. Looking round at them, her thoughts still upon Amorel, she was pulled up short by the look on Oliver's face. He was scowling as if hell had loosed its devils upon him: she could see his hands shifting restlessly upon his knees; his shoulders were drawn forward, his head bent down. She widened her gaze, and saw Alix sitting a few rows behind them, between Ralph Truscott and Amorel's learned friend, Paul Fleming.

Somebody was already pushing past her. Bainton was calling to her over Viola's and Felicity's heads.

'Aren't you coming out, Susan? Time to have a cigarette or a drink.'

She pulled herself together quickly.

'Right. Oliver, wake up. Come out and have a drink.'

Oliver stumbled to his feet like a man in a dream; followed her out of the auditorium without turning his head. But she saw Alix's amused glance alight upon him, and the next moment her sister had persuaded Fleming to accompany her out into the corridor. She at once came up to the noisy group of them; ignoring completely every one else — unless her pleasant smile had been indiscriminately addressed to them all — and speaking directly to Oliver and Susan.

'Of course, we might have expected to find you here. How absurd! We might all have come down together. Susan, do you know Mr. Fleming? Paul, my sister. Oliver, tell me, has your leg quite recovered?'

In a second it happened that they were separated by the continual stream of people: Oliver and Alix against one wall, Susan left with Paul Fleming by the other. Susan was too stricken down to be aware of her own silence, until a deep kindly voice spoke from a great height above her.

'Aren't you the Miss Pellerin that Amorel has often written of? I saw you once at a party in her room, if you remember. But it was a very distant acquaintance. I have wanted to meet you more intimately.'

Susan had turned, and, while he spoke, was studying his face. She thought she had never seen any one so wise or kind; with so little evidence of bitterness, or self-seeking, or with so gentle and courteous a voice.

'I have heard a great deal about you, too, from Amorel. And I remember you very distinctly from that party. How awfully good she is to-night, isn't she? Isn't it splendid that all the people here like her so much?'

'She probably isn't as good, as a matter of fact, as she has been. She gets too comfortable and careless in her part. After the first night Amorel has less nervousness on the stage than any one I have ever known; and she has a tendency to gag too much, and play too much to the gallery.'

'But isn't that a good thing? All in the Shakespearean tradition?'

'Only for actors of the Shakespearean stature. Amorel's spirits run away with her. However, they reach the audience. And, from a box-office point of view, that is much to be thankful for.'

Susan was wondering why, since — as she knew from Amorel — Paul Fleming had been out of England almost ever since that party, he should be on such friendly terms with her sister. He spoke as if he could read her thoughts.

'It is strange that I should have met Alix on my way from Chelsea this morning. She was the first person I met, ten years ago, at almost exactly the same spot, when I came back to England after a long time in Italy; and she was then in the company of my cousin, Anna Torby. You must know Anna, too. She was at Frome Court.'

'How very strange! But didn't Alix recognize you at the party?'

'She did, and we talked about old times. But she did not connect me with Amorel. She has only just discovered my ignominious position of annually rejected suitor.'

'Oh, isn't Amorel hopeless? But she is such a darling.' Susan was talking now at random; her small curiosity satisfied, she was back in spirit with Alix and Oliver. If Paul noticed — and he probably did, since she could not help turning her head towards them, and he could so easily see over her — he was very quick to sense the situation.

'I can't have your young friend monopolizing your sister. After all, she brought me here to-night, or I shouldn't have come down until Monday. And, having brought me, she must now do her duty.' His great height and bulk made a way for both of them across the corridor.

'Come, Rand, attractive as my charming friend is, I'm going to take her away from you. And here's some one who doesn't deserve to be neglected. How do you do, Viola. Jeremy, I want to see you, my boy. Ring me to-morrow? The

Grosvenor. Ah, how are you, Miss Ridley? I heard that you got that Bartolozzi you were after. I congratulate you.'

The group took him in; circled round him. Susan wondered if the bell for the second act would never ring. When the buzzer actually went, the return of the audience to their seats was so leisurely that Susan was impelled towards hysteria; but she controlled herself, steadily, smiling at one and another. When they got back into an already darkened auditorium, she found that no one bothered about finding his own seat, and there had been a general reshuffle. Oliver was farther away from her than ever. She had no idea what happened in the next act; the singing ran through her head, the colour and light through her brain; but her thoughts were as black as the darkness round her.

In the next interval she lacked the courage to go out. After some polite protest, the others left her. Turning round, she saw that this time Ralph Truscott had followed them. When the rest returned, Oliver and Alix were not with them. A mental agony — so acute as to afflict her physically as well — seized and tormented her. At the end she could hardly find strength to applaud. Yet, when Viola and Jeremy went round, she must go with them, down the tiled passages, up and down little flights of stairs, to Amorel's dressing-room.

Here there was good-humour and great hilarity. Amorel embraced her with affection, and was immediately claimed by some one else. Bainton was facetiously introduced to the heroine of the evening.

'Here's your next leading man, my dear. He shares the honours with you to-night. The idol of the pit. The gallery's darling. Show your paces, Bainton.'

He was made to blow out his whizz-bang toys, swallow half-crowns and bring them out through his sleeve, and crown Amorel with a paper hat, as if by magic. Susan withdrew herself from the rest under the pretext of looking after Felicity, who was still to most of them a stranger. But she could not converse, or behave naturally; and Oliver's sister, quite unconscious of her brother's absence — she had been too delighted by Amorel, and too engrossed in her novel experience, to miss him — saw that something had very much upset Susan, and quietly left her to herself.

Eventually all their good-nights were said — or such as were not reserved to be said later — and those who were going home together made hilariously for the street. Attracted by the noise, which, as Lisa remarked, must have penetrated some miles to a cab-rank, a number of taxis soon made their appearance. As the last cab was driving off, with Susan, Jeremy, Viola, Felicity, and two of the other members of Amorel's company, the door was wrenched open and Oliver jumped in; his eyes wild, his hair blowing in the rush of wind. Now the taxi was so full that its sides must have been near to bursting: Susan, half-submerged in the farthest corner, did not even know whether Oliver had seen her. They all teased him, shouted at him, pulled his tie and further rumpled his hair; but, though now and again he roared with laughter, or made some scurrilous comment, his abstraction was as complete as her own. When they neared Cheyne Walk, some one remembered Susan.

'Hi, Cabby!'

'Whoa, Jehu!'

'Lady wants to get out. That's the house. By the lamp-post. *Here* we are, then!'

Lisa got out at the same time. It was hot in the taxi, and she preferred to walk the last half-mile to her flat. One of the actors, a shy little man, who on the stage had been a comic waiter, announced that his family lived just round the corner, and he and Lisa set off together. The cab went rolling on its noisy way.

Jane or Alix or Amorel, home earlier than they, had left the door of the house open. Susan found that Oliver was following her into the dark of the hall. He held out his hands towards her with a helpless gesture, and she put her arms out to him: with a cry he caught her up and fiercely kissed her; the next moment the door had slammed and he was gone.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Neither Oliver nor Susan made any mention afterwards of that evening. Christmas Day each of them spent in a family manner, not very happily. When on Boxing Day they met, as had been arranged, to go to a theatre, the gilt was off the gingerbread, and both of them knew it.

Oliver, who was always early rather than late for an appointment, was waiting by Battersea Bridge for Susan to overtake him, since he would not under any persuasion approach the house. They sat side by side — Susan stiffly, he awkwardly sprawling — in embarrassed silence. Then:

'Stuffy, isn't it? Would you like the window down?'

'It would be rather nice.'

'Did you enjoy your family Christmas?'

'There wasn't much family about it, really. Alix wasn't well and was in bed most of the day. We ate extraordinary mixtures of things, some cooked by Penny and some sent in a huge crate from Andrew. Amorel and Paul came in to us for a Christmas dinner. Then Jeremy wandered along, and Alix got up for tea and went back to bed again. Then the others departed. And then I went to bed, too.'

'You were lucky. Christmas Day is the one time in the year that my father's two sisters think that they ought to be charitable to Mother, for they both dislike her. They're as wealthy as Crœsus and twice as hard-headed, yet they sit round the table and goggle at all the things that used to be in their home when they were children. As if they were trying to make Mother so embarrassed that she would give it back to them.'

'What a comfortable party!'

'As comfortable as hell, but not half so cheerful. They would like to make a fuss of me, because in looks I'm supposed to be like Father. But they're always uneasy; they never know when I'm going to say something impossible, or stand on my head, or introduce them to a dustman. There are uses in having an unsavoury reputation. It helps to keep relations in order.'

Silence took possession of them again, and lasted until they reached the theatre. When he thought she would not notice him, Oliver encompassed Susan in a gaze that seemed to burn its way through to her consciousness: she grew nervous and her thwarted affection tormented her. When they got to their seats in the theatre, the memory of Christmas Eve struck them both overwhelmingly and unexpectedly. She looked at Oliver and saw how pale he had gone.

'I can't stand this. Let's get out. Do you mind?'

People stared curiously to see them departing. They brushed past incoming men and women, jovial with the Christmas spirit, determined to enjoy themselves, however hypocritically. A red-faced man, whose white tie encircled his neck as prettily as a ribbon round a chocolate-box, put out a protecting arm to shield the gossamer frock of his companion.

'I say,' he said, staring at Oliver's back, 'what a young puppy! Can't think what's happened to the manners of these boys. Didn't tread on your toes, did he?'

'No. I wonder what was the matter with him.' The woman patted a sleek cap of polished, gold hair and studied the tip of her nose in a mirror. 'He looked as though he might be ill at any moment.'

'Probably eaten too much Christmas pudding. Hey?' And the fat man, whose stomach had grown accustomed to his own gastronomic indulgences, shook with laughter and forgot about Oliver.

In the foyer a commissionnaire came forward with an offer of assistance. Oliver did not even see him; Susan had no time to do anything but thank him quickly and shake her head. In the street they recovered a certain amount of equanimity. At last Oliver's leg made him slacken his pace, and he turned to Susan with an apology.

'Sorry, darling, but it was hopeless, wasn't it? Now, what in God's name are we going to do? You're not cold, are you?'

Susan felt very cold, but, whether it was with nerves or with chill that her teeth were chattering, she did not know. She denied his suggestion.

'Can't do much in these clothes. What about a low music-hall? Then we could come out when we wanted to. Did you want to see that play, darling?'

'I don't care a bit, and I'm thankful we came out. All music-halls are very much alike, aren't they? I don't think I want to get there early. Couldn't we go somewhere and have a drink?'

'We'll go to the Victoria Palace and stay in the bar till the first turn's over. It's always frightful.'

'Where are your gloves?'

'Left them in the theatre. Can't help it now. Come on.'

In the warm, stuffy bar Susan began to feel better. The 'gin-and-It,' warming her body, also subdued her nerves. By the time they were in the auditorium she was almost cheerful.

On the stage was a woman in voluminous skirts staggering in skilful circles on a bicycle. Whenever she lurched, a roar of laughter rose from the well of the house. She pulled up with a jerk and the bicycle-horn fell off. She went on with a bound, and rode over the horn, so that it gave a loud squeak that was indescribably comic. The orchestra, skilfully rounding up the appreciation of the audience as a clever sheep-dog rounds up the flock, swelled to a volume of cheerfulness. By the time the fiddles and bells and wind instruments were rising to their climax, the 'woman,' revealed now by the trousers under her skirts as a man — a fact which the audience, of course, had known all along and which had subtly contributed to the humour — was riding round swiftly on a bicycle whose handle-bars were dissociated from the frame and were held inconsequently in the air. In another moment, waving a ridiculous parasol that preceded her from the wings, she cantered in on a monstrously tall penny-farthing. To a crashing of chords and a volume of cheering, the curtain swept down.

Susan turned laughing to Oliver. His bright eyes met hers. Under cover of the general preoccupation of the audience one with another, they found and clasped hands. In front of them a golden-headed beauty was plastering a thick surface of red on her lips in a way as business-like as if she were laying bricks with mortar. Next to Susan a mop of red hair reposed unembarrassed and happy on a neighbouring expanse of white shirt-front, exposed not because its wearer had dressed for the evening, but because, the atmosphere being close, he had unbuttoned his waistcoat. Up in the gallery, unconscious and vividly illumined, a man and a girl swayed in close embrace. The small crowd of people around them were not even taking any notice; they were all staring down or about them, whistling, singing scraps of song, or casting fragments of humour, like bread upon the waters, down to the stalls.

'Oliver,' whispered Susan, 'stop being superior for a minute. Wouldn't you rather be English than belong to any other nation?'

He grinned and clasped her hand more tightly. 'You'd find food for patriotic self-congratulation in a bear-pit.' But she knew that he was as appreciative, and as stimulated, as she had been.

So, in a manner, they made it up. They listened to a woman, who must once have been charming in a youthful, kittenish way, impel the audience, by the sheer force of her character, to receive her still with enthusiasm; though her hair, so bright a yellow as to stagger the vision, was hard and brittle-looking as fine-spun glass; and her arms and body, thin and ugly, moved awkwardly in the simulation of youth. But her voice remained an echo of the glory it once had held, and trilled and rippled with an ease that was still beyond the capacity of any other singer on the bill that evening. A couple of clowns, one tall and agile, one short and clumsy, did their age-old business with the traditional properties. Susan would only have asked for a harlequinade to complete her enjoyment. But that is a delight which seems to have been lost for ever, silted over with the neglect of years, until popular appetite, jaded with other forms of entertainment, shall dig the old bones up again and give them some new sophisticated semblance of life.

When, surfeited with entertainment, Susan whispered 'Let's go now,' they fumbled for Oliver's hat and Susan's bag and left the audience upon a crest of laughter.

'What a good bill!' They were in the street now, and a taxi was bearing down on them. 'What a morally uplifting thing it must be to amuse people!'

'It's easy enough, given a dirty mind and an innocent manner.'

'Easy occasionally, but not night after night. And not when you're feeling ill or depressed...'

The cab, an old and decrepit one, jogged past the Grosvenor Hotel. Its progress was so slow that people were continually walking across the road in front of it, their heads and shoulders caught up by the headlights: laughing women, pert girls vivid with make-up, noisy little boys who ought to have been in bed; men with eager or downcast or lascivious faces; an occasional shuffling beggar. When they turned into Royal Hospital Road, they left all noise and brilliant lights behind them, passing between rows of silent and darkened houses, broken now and again by an illumined window, a street-lamp, or a small, merry group coming away from a public-house.

At the corner of the Embankment, Oliver stopped the taxi and they got out to look at the river.

'Going on, Mister?' The cabby was lazy and wanted to get back to doze in comfort on the rank.

'Shall we walk, Susan?'

She nodded, and he paid the fare. They stood gazing down into the silent, black depths of the water until they themselves were dizzied by its unvaried, continual movement.

Then, upon a common impulse, they turned away and walked homewards, stopping for a cup of coffee and a ham sandwich at the flare-lit stall by the bridge.

'Mustard, Miss?'

'Yes, please — just a little.'

Bread was neatly slapped upon bread; sandwich on plate.

'Thank you, sir. Fine night, sir.'

'Very. Business good?'

'Pretty steady, so long as the rain keeps off. People like something to warm them on nights like this.'

'Regulars?'

'Oh, yes, sir, some on 'em. From the flats round 'ere. 'Ugh Nixon now, the artist — you've 'eard of 'im? — 'e stops two or three nights a week for 'is cocoa. Likes it so thick with sugar that the spoon fair stands up in it.'

'Perhaps he never gets enough sugar in his cocoa at home.'

'I dare say you're right, Miss. Some of these here artists hain't got much 'ome to speak of. Good-night, Miss. Good-night, sir. 'Appy New Year to you.'

Oliver saw her to the door without apparently remembering his aversion to Alix. Nothing happened to disturb the recaptured serenity of the evening. His farewell was gentle and affectionate, just such a parting as the occasion needed. Susan, lying awake for some time, wondered if the coffee-stall man's farewell had been an omen. Having readopted with deliberation her rose-coloured spectacles, it seemed a pity to ignore the traditional significance of the New Year. Oliver, recovered, had been very happy and at ease in her company; it was foolish to give way as she had on Christmas Eve. She had told herself that nothing could make her give him up; yet she had been defeated by her own jealousy at the first struggle. With the New Year the forces of Nature would be on her side; bent upon the producing of a fresh and happy aspect for the world, they must infuse a new strength into her own resolution. So, sleepily, she determined.

Yet, though she saw a good deal of Oliver during the last days of December, he was not always happy, and she recognized the influence that was distracting him. For this reason she evaded seeing too much of Felicity, who, with understanding, made no attempt to persuade her.

New Year's Eve approached, and Susan awaited it with a mixture of hope and dread. In the thought that she might lay the uneasy ghost of Christmas, she suggested that she and Oliver should go somewhere together. But he avoided her look and her proposal, saying that his mother expected him to accompany her to dinner with some very old friends of the family.

'She suggested you should come, too,' he said without looking up — he was at his old trick of tracing a pattern on the floor with his stick — 'but I told her you wouldn't want to.'

'Why did you do that?'

'You'd have been bored stiff. Besides, I don't want you to get mixed up with all those people. It's such a relief to escape to you. You are always different.' And he became for a little the uneasy, urgent, appealing lover, binding her to him more closely with promises, plans, and ardent, memorable kisses. But Susan felt that his explanation had no sound of sincerity, and, though she had looked forward to their meeting, and gave herself up to his passionate love-making with eagerness, hoping to lose in it her unrest, she was glad when he had gone again.

She decided, since Alix, in a blunt fashion, had suggested that she wanted the rooms to herself, to make a pilgrimage alone about London. While Oliver composed himself to conventional politeness, she would strengthen the intangible threads that held between them by weaving them, with her thoughts, in and out of the streets and buildings of the town they lived in, making it a treasure-house for their love.

The night, for such an adventure, could not have been better. When she set out, it was cloudy; an hour later, the wind had swept the sky clear for the stars, which shone with a brilliance that swung the world, accustomed to rivalling with its lamps the lights of heaven, dizzily out of focus. The same wind swayed every tree until its bare branches were buffeted one against the other with a dull sound like the striking of the boom against a mast.

Curtains were suddenly snatched from open windows and waved like valiant flags for the passers-by. Windows were hastily banged down by people who resented this intrusion of the elements. In brightly lit streets like Regent Street and Piccadilly a general spirit of festivity was aided and abetted by the wind, which, by snatching hats from people's heads, blowing away from them the newspapers they held under their arms, whipping out strands of women's hair to lash across their faces, and generally making human beings the sport of the moment, provided plenty of outlet for ribaldry and humour. An old woman, carrying a heavy bag of merchandise, had her skirts blown up to her waist, and her flannel petticoats twisted round her legs so that she almost fell; merry, lewd jests were flung at her from the doorstep of an inn, and, for all their rudeness, there was no harm in them. Susan, walking through the idle, merry-making crowds, received various offers of companionship that were goodhumouredly withdrawn when, smiling, she shook her head and walked on alone.

She shared in the enjoyment of people seen through torn curtains, clustered round fires under unshaded gas-jets; in the mirth of drunken groups dancing to the tune of a husky gramophone in the warmth of yellow-lit bar parlours; in the sleepy jests of two or three road-menders sitting in the clearly etched shadows of their little canvas tent, behind the heat of a brazier. Later, she was caught in a stream of people coming away from a theatre.

'I do think she's good, you know. She gets away with it every time.'

'Oh, but such irritating *mannerisms*, don't you think? And hasn't she got *fat?*'

'"... soles of his shoes so thin he could tell by standing on it whether a sixpence was heads or tails." Damn funny that. The best Scotch joke...'

'... now where's Amy? Oh, there you are, dear. Come along; it's so difficult to pick up a taxi...'

'George! Here's one ——'

Crossing Shaftesbury Avenue she slipped away from them and cut through back streets, where looks were less kindly and warned her to hurry into more populated thoroughfares, to Charing

Cross Road. In the Strand, at about half-past eleven, she got on a bus that took her to Chelsea. It was five minutes before midnight when, after looking for a light in Alix's room, which would warn her if her sister's visitor had not gone yet, Susan turned the key in the lock, in a mood of deep joy and optimism, a clear looking-forward to the future, born of her independence and the enjoyment of the night.

Very quietly she closed the door behind her and stood listening to the house, as if it were an individual who should now speak to her or welcome her. Then voices from Alix's room held her where she stood, with a numbing of the senses that stiffened her whole body. Through this confusion a fragment of dialogue reached her.

'... going to leave me, then, without one kiss?'

'Yes, damn you! Let me go! I've been trying to go all the evening. Haven't I always avoided you?'

'Not quite always, Sir Galahad. What about that night on the Amalfi?'

'Very well, then, you lovely devil, you beautiful white lily — oh, yes, I'll kiss you — kiss you — that's what you wanted, isn't it?'

'Ah — Oliver ——'

'Oh, I've got you now — at last ——'

Susan stared through the hall for a way of escape; from her own room, next to Alix's, she turned with horror. In an agony of panic she reached the stairs and ran up them at a speed that sent the blood beating about her ears and through her veins. Oliver and Alix, hearing the confused scamper, stood still and tense for a moment; then Alix relaxed.

'Penny,' she whispered, 'gone up from the bathroom.'

They drew together again.

But Susan was standing in the darkness of Amorel's bedroom, the window thrown wide, a great draught flinging the curtains about and rattling the pictures on the walls. Aching sobs were shaking her and bursting from her with a moaning cry that was torn from her lips by the wind and thrown out upon the night; tears began to wet her cheeks and a trembling seized her body. As she stood there utterly given up to despair, the various clocks within hearing began, irregularly and further falsified by the breeze, to strike twelve. There was a sudden clashing of a multitude of bells from a host of hidden steeples. Two tugs, meeting in mid-stream, saluted one another with the customary call from their sirens; as they progressed farther in opposite directions they met other craft, and the joyful salutations were distantly repeated.

The last chime of bells died on the tumultuous air. The New Year had begun.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The resolving of the melodrama into the more ordinary fabric of life was accomplished the next morning.

Amorel came home at about three o'clock, to find Susan, face downwards, on her bed and her whole room in confusion, ravaged by the wind, which had now quieted to a small, harmless breeze. But as soon as she advanced into the room, the girl was awake and started to her feet, brushing the tears from her face with the back of her hand, trying to smooth her hair and clothes into decency.

'Hullo,' she said, in a curious, sharp voice, high, like a child's, 'I'm afraid I fell asleep on your divan. Do you mind? I must — go down — to bed.'

She turned towards the door on unsteady feet, but Amorel caught her hand.

'Now, Susan, tell me what's the matter.'

'Nothing.' Nor, for all Amorel's urgency, conveyed in a voice that smelt warmly of whiskey, would she tell her. But it does not take a magnifying-glass to analyse such a situation.

'Well, whatever has happened, you'll sleep with me to-night.' Amorel uncovered the bed and shook up the pillows. She helped Susan to undress and rubbed her cold hands to revive the chill blood in them. Susan was evidently worn out with her emotion, and it was not a difficult matter to get her to sleep; indeed, her behaviour was altogether more like that of a sleep-walker than a responsible person.

Amorel was awake first in the morning and slipped out of bed without disturbing her guest, and was silently making tea on the gas-ring in the fireplace when Alix knocked on the door.

She touched her lips with her fingers.

'Sh-sh. What is it?'

Alix was breathless and looked frightened.

'Susan hasn't come home. What am I to do? I don't know where she was going last night.'

'She has come home.' Amorel knew nothing to connect Susan's misery with her sister. 'Look. She's fast asleep still. I think it's better to leave her.'

'Thank the Lord! Oh, what a scare she gave me!' Alix's poise and confidence began to come back again. 'Send her down for a scolding when she wakes. Little wretch! Lord! What a panic!' Smiling the quick smile that was her own economical expression of gratitude, Alix was gone again. Amorel shut the door behind her. A pale sunlight began to penetrate through the clouds and stretched a ghostly finger on Susan's chin. Perhaps she felt it, or perhaps she was ready now to wake; in any case, she opened her eyes and, after a moment's bewilderment, was sitting up in bed, staring at Amorel like a terrified bird that wakes to the realization that it has been put in a cage.

'Oh — dear — I'd quite forgotten where I was.' She struggled to regain calm. 'What a lovely morning after the storm.'

'Storm? You've been dreaming. There wasn't a storm, except a windy one. Here's a cup of hot tea, now. Let me make the pillows comfortable.'

'Thank you.' Susan's character seemed to have melted into docility. She drank the tea slowly, sipping it without taking her gaze from a round-eyed stare at the river. 'What nice tea.' She finished drinking it in silence. 'How silly! I haven't got a dressing-gown. What did I do with my clothes last night? I can't remember.'

'Here they are, my dear. But are you sure you want to get up? Why don't you stay in bed a little longer? There's no reason to hurry.'

'Oh, no, thank you. I'll go down now.' Suddenly she came more completely to herself and looked at Amorel with clearer eyes. 'You are awfully kind, aren't you?' The old panic shook her again, and Amorel noticed how she trembled. 'I made an awful fool of myself last night.'

'Not a bit of it. *That's* all right.' Amorel turned away and busied herself unimportantly about the room. 'You're sure you feel better?'

'Oh, yes. Amorel, I must go away. Do you know where would be a good place to go to?'

'What do you mean? For you and Alix? Brighton ——'

'No — not Alix ——' Again she shivered violently. 'By myself. Except Sussex, I don't know anywhere. And I don't want to go back there. Oh, of course I can think of a place. I was only hoping you would save me the trouble of deciding.' She smiled, more in her old manner. 'I'll play the game of opening the A, B, C, with my eyes shut. That would be nice and dramatic.'

'For a long or a short time?'

'For ever. Anyway, till I've escaped from myself for a bit.'

'You won't do that very easily if you go alone.' Amorel hesitated. 'You wouldn't tag round for a while with the company? We start out at the end of this week, you know. It isn't a gay prospect, and we don't live in luxury. But you'd have plenty of entertainment.'

Susan stopped dead in her slow walk across the room.

'Do you mean that? Would it be possible? Isn't it rather unusual?'

'Lord, no! Viola once toured for three months with me, mending my socks and starting the laughs in the audience and sewing up my tights in the wings when I caught them on the scenery. And we're always on the move. If you've never done it before, it wouldn't be dull for you.'

'What about Paul? Isn't he going this time?'

'Yes. *He'd* be delighted, my dear. It would be too wonderful for him to have some one to be highbrow with. And he's always said he'd like to get to know you better. Do come, Susan.' Amorel set down the cups she was clearing off the table and put her arms round the girl's shoulders. 'I mean it. I'd *love* it.'

'You — are — rather a — darling.' Susan suffered herself to be embraced, and felt again the near approach of tears. 'You are probably guessing what's happened. You've made me feel more human, Amorel. You're all the things one hadn't believed were true except in fairy-tales. I must go down to Alix now. But may I come back?'

'If you're not back in an hour,' said Amorel, kissing her, 'I shall come down and fetch you. You're sure you're up to it?'

'Sure.' Susan waved a hand from the door and set out on the journey downstairs; but her false composure left her and agony came creeping back, so that she clung to the banisters for support, because of her trembling. When she opened the door of Alix's room, her face was ghastly. Alix, seeing it, put her hand to her throat and sat down in her chair.

'What is it?'

'You know perfectly well what it is.' Susan's voice was dull and weary. She walked slowly across to the folding doors between the two rooms.

'What do you mean? Sit down, Susan, and don't be so agonized.'

'I don't want to talk about it. I would much prefer to go.' To speak at all was an effort she felt she could not continue. But Alix's voice snapped as Susan, vaguely, remembered to have heard it snap once before. The picture of Jane came up in her mind.

'You're being thoroughly melodramatic and making a frightful fuss about nothing. Pull yourself together. You were perfectly all right last night. I can't do very much, can I, until you tell me what has happened?'

Susan gave up the attempt to get away and walked over to the fireplace, and as she looked at her sister, a vision she had never seen, but now so fiercely imagined that it tore her self-control from her — a vision of Oliver holding Alix in his arms — released her at last from Alix's bondage and set them face to face as strangers.

'When I came in last night I heard you and Oliver. Alix, Alix, you've had everything you wanted all your life! Why couldn't you have left me Oliver?' The tears ran down her cheeks in a quick, burning torrent. 'There was never anything I didn't give up when you wanted it, from the dolls you liked when you were really too big to play with dolls, to the people we knew at school. You pretended to be so fond of me, but you never were. You only wanted to show off. I loved Mother every bit as much as you did, but it was you she was fond of. And when Daddy showed he loved me, you weren't happy till you'd made yourself ill, so that he was anxious and forgot all about me.' The words escaped from her as if she had had them in long preparation. Yet never before, even in her own heart, had she been aware of them, or of the conflict they revealed. 'And now you've had Ralph Truscott, and Jane for a friend, and Jennifer. I'd never have known Jennifer if you hadn't got tired of her. Why did you have to have Oliver?'

She buried her face in her hands, shaken with crying.

But Alix, angry and insolent, threw her a quick reply.

'I suppose this wonderful Oliver could choose for himself, couldn't he?'

'You know perfectly well he couldn't. He did love me, but you were too much for him.'

'Then isn't it a very good thing you've found him out in time? Come, Susan.' She changed her manner, and got up and came over to where Susan was sitting. 'What if I was wiser than I seemed to be, and didn't particularly want my little sister to be married to any one like Oliver?'

Susan jumped up in a fury, leaving Alix poised like a butterfly on the arm of the empty chair.

'Say that to him! He's coming in to hear it!'

The handle of the door was actually turning, and almost at once Oliver was himself in the room. He looked from one to the other, his face dark and deeply shadowed. He walked, without speaking, to the window and stood, with his hands in his pockets, looking out over the river, as if he were invisible to them and they unaware of his presence.

But the sight of him stung Alix to recklessness.

'He would make a charming husband for anybody,' she threw at them both, 'the lover of Lisa and Viola, and any number of even less reputable women. I should think it's a damned good thing for you...'

Now Oliver turned his back to her and came over to Susan. He looked at her with melancholy, distracted, as if he were only half with them. If there had been anything in that look to call to Susan's heart, she would have gone to him. But:

'She's despicable, Susan, but she's right, you know. I did warn you, didn't I? It won't be her any more. That's dead. But it's sure to be some other woman.' He stood poking with his toe at the edge of the rug.

Alix watched him with scorn; he had no power to hurt her. 'I think I'd better leave the two of you — since you love one another so much — to fight it out. One day you'll be grateful to me, Susan.'

She walked over to the cupboard, pulled a hat on her head, and, as they watched her, was gone; to find restoration in the admiring looks of people in the street and in the flattery of Ralph Truscott, for her torn dignity and for the fright which, in spite of herself, had shaken her.

Oliver and Susan waited as if there were no more to be said by either of them, but instead there must be a messenger from the heavens to push the balance of their loves one way or the other. Susan could hardly bear her love for him; she would have gone to his embrace without care for the past or the future if he had turned to her.

But he did not look at her. He was still staring at the rug.

'It's frightfully funny, when you come to think of it,' he said at last. 'Almost a hat trick. What a pity there weren't three sisters!'

Now Susan fled from him to her own room, all her emotions turned back upon herself. Yet, when she was safely there, sitting on the edge of her bed, she could neither cry nor move, nor shut her senses against the impressions that assailed them. Through the beating of her pulses she must listen for the last of Oliver.

But Oliver, left to himself, went over to the gramophone and searched among the records. He found the one he sought and wound the engine. Never, since he came into the house, had the expression changed on his face.

'Poor little rich girl,
You're a bewitched girl,
Tum-tum, te tum-tum...'

The tune blared out and an errand-boy, crossing the road, heard it and started whistling. Oliver limped away from the house. Somewhere in the basement Rose was singing a rival melody, of a more leisurely kind and with a more waltz-like sentiment. Penny shook her duster out of the window above Susan's and loaded the breeze with a smirch of whirling motes. The creak of an old cart was a sharp sound in the air, and the clop, clop, of the horse's hoofs twisted it into a rhythm. A baby started crying, pitifully, with a thin, weak wail.

In the looking-glass above Susan's mantelpiece was pushed a letter from Andrew. Susan looked at it stupidly. 'The Faithful Friend,' she thought, remembering Lisa, and the memory left her mind emptier than before. She started searching for the clothes she must take with her, if she was to accompany Amorel.

Andrew, who had a fortunate capacity for detachment, was not at that moment thinking of Susan. He was fitting a shelf, which had slipped from its supporting pins, more securely in the china cabinet in his mother's drawing-room. But, finishing the task, he stood up, and his gaze fell upon the clock. So quickly attendant upon the notion of Time is the notion of Space that immediately Andrew was off in his imagination in search of Susan; wondering what she might be doing. He imagined her reading by the fire, or — with clear precision he saw her — buying gloves, warm gloves, in a shop. But, although he was so far wrong, he experienced an odd lightening of mood, as if there were a message flying to him from her upon the undiscoverable waves of thought. For the thousandth time he allowed his fancy to plan an imaginary future.

And, in the Chelsea house, the gramophone ground itself to silence in an empty room.

THE END

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 09776 933 3

2.50

BID HER AWAKE

MARY GRIGS

How Susan walks in the shadow of her beautiful older sister until love bids her awake.

TATTER'D LOVING

By Phyllis Bottome

DRAMATIC and superbly ruthless is this study of a woman who lived for love. Vera Middleton asks too much of those who love her. From her husband and then her lover and her daughter she demands constant adoration beyond the power of human nature to give. It is only a question of time before the inevitable climax must come. Miss Bottome builds up her suspense like a great wave, mounting and mounting until at last it breaks in the final clash between Vera and Ariadne. Vera's passionate seeking and the sharp contrast between her blind selfishness and Ariadne's sanity and generosity form a plot well suited to Miss Bottome's skill. Crystal brilliance of style, adroitness in dealing with characters and situations, — this is Phyllis Bottome at her sparkling, heady, sophisticated best. In the flame-like personality of Vera she has created a character as fascinating as she is unforgettable.

NEW NOVELS

TATTER'D LOVING
By Phyllis Bottome

STARRY ADVENTURE
By Mary Austin

WHITE JADE
By Maude Meagher

THE OPEN SECRET
By Oliver Onions

FIVE ON PARADE
By Doris Peel

BID HER AWAKE
By Mary Grigs

DIXON'S CUBS
By John C. Moore

YEARS OF GRACE
By Margaret Ayer Barnes

THE ANVIL
By Gustav Frenssen

THE YOUNG LIVINGSTONES
By Denis Mackail

THE MIDDLE WATCH
By Ian Hay and Stephen King-Hall

A MODERN GALAXY
Assembled by Dale Warren

THARLANE
By Dorothy Cottrell

DAYS OF HER LIFE
By Wallace Irwin

HOUGHTON MIFFLIN COMPANY